



SHAMBHALA DRAGON EDITIONS

# LIEH-TZU

*A Taoist Guide to Practical Living*



Eva Wong

“A bright and lively translation that captures the essential insights of the *Lieh-Tzu*.”

—*Library Journal*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

The *Lieh-tzu* is a collection of stories and philosophical musings of a sage of the same name who lived around the fourth century BCE. Lieh-tzu's teachings range from the origin and purpose of life, the Taoist view of reality, and the nature of enlightenment to the training of the body and mind, communication, and the importance of personal freedom. This distinctive translation presents Lieh-tzu as a friendly, intimate companion speaking directly to the reader in a contemporary voice about matters relevant to our everyday lives.

EVA WONG is an independent scholar and a practitioner of the Taoist arts of the Pre-Celestial Way and Complete Reality lineages. She has written and translated many books on Taoism and related topics, including *A Master Course in Feng-Shui*; *Tales of the Taoist Immortals*; and *Taoism: An Essential Guide*.

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# LIEH-TZU

A TAOIST GUIDE TO PRACTICAL LIVING

*Eva Wong*



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## Introduction

### READING LIEH-TZU

THIS INTRODUCTION is for those who would like to know more about the historical and philosophical background of the *Lieh-tzu*. It also outlines a method of presenting the teachings of a spiritual text. Readers who are only interested in the practical advice the *Lieh-tzu* can offer us in our everyday lives should go straight to the text and return to the introduction later.

When asked to name three representative texts of Taoism, most people would list the *Lao-tzu* (the *Tao-te Ching*), the *Chuangtzu*, and the *Lieh-tzu*. Of the three, the *Lao-tzu* is probably the best known and most widely read, and for Westerners, it is most likely the book that introduced them to Taoism. Those who want to continue to explore the philosophy of Taoism might venture into the *Chuangtzu*, and the more curious would probably wonder what the *Lieh-tzu* is all about.

By some strange circumstances, my introduction to these three famous texts of Taoism was the reverse. I read the *Lao-tzu* after studying the *Chuangtzu*, and before I had even heard of Taoism, the stories of the *Lieh-tzu* were familiar to me from my childhood readers. That I was introduced to the *Chuangtzu* before the *Lao-tzu* can probably be attributed to some freak decision by the Board of Education in Hong Kong, the council that planned the curriculum when I was in high school. That I was introduced to the stories contained in the *Lieh-tzu* when I was a child can be attributed to the fact that many of the ideas of the *Lieh-tzu* have become a part of the Chinese culture. Although my family was bilingual, I grew up in Chinese culture, and the *Lieh-tzu* gave me and my schoolmates kernels of wisdom packed in fables and proverbs. Even at age six or seven, we knew about the Old Fool who tried to move the mountains, the man who worried that the sky would fall, and the man who tried to chase down the sun.

That the stories in the *Lieh-tzu* are common in children's readers also shows that Lieh-tzu's teachings are simple for children to understand and yet profound for adults to ponder. I have since looked at a lot of children's storybooks in

Chinese, and I have never failed to find some of Lieh-tzu's stories and teachings in them. However, I have yet to find stories or teachings from the *Chuangtzu* or the *Lao-tzu* in children's books. Not that these two texts do not contain words of wisdom, but I've always felt there is something very special about Lieh-tzu's teachings that can reach a child and an adult at the same time.

It is this "something special" in the *Lieh-tzu* that attracted me to the text. When I first started studying the *Lieh-tzu*, I did it in the traditional way Chinese classics were studied: I memorized a section of the text, then studied the section's commentaries that were collected in the Taoist canon. I continued with this process until I had gone through all eight sections of the original text. After several years I had a nice catalogue of ideas in my head, but I did not feel I really understood the teachings of the book. So I stopped the project.

A year later, I felt an urge to read the *Lieh-tzu* again. This time, instead of studying it, I simply read it. It was in this second attempt at understanding the *Lieh-tzu* that the text started "speaking" to me and I began to listen. At first its voice was hesitant, as if it were trying to make my acquaintance before confiding its intentions to me. But after a while, it spoke often. Initially, I was someone it could talk to. Then I became someone it wanted to share its thoughts with. Finally, we became kindred spirits. It walked with me in city streets and hiked with me through mountain trails. It spoke and I listened; I spoke and it listened. I began to feel that I had reached an understanding of its teachings. Even now, after several years of listening to the *Lieh-tzu*, it is still speaking, and I feel it will continue to speak as an advisor and friend.

## Lieh-tzu: The Person and the Book

Lieh-tzu was a real person who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period of the Eastern Ch'ou dynasty (770–476 BCE). Most historians now agree that he was born around 400 BCE, about two hundred years after Lao-tzu and Confucius. He was a citizen of the feudal kingdom of Cheng, and, like many people of his time who were weary of the political struggles and intrigues, he never held a government post. He was reputed to have studied under Wen-tzu, who was a student of Lao-tzu, and with various shadowy and legendary characters such as Hu-tzu and Old Shang the Immortal. Of the rest of his life, not much is known.

Lieh-tzu was not listed in the biographies of philosophers in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Records* (the *Shi-chi*), and for a long time, scholars who relied on this work as a source of information on the history of the Ch'ou dynasty had dismissed Lieh-tzu as an imaginary character. However, his existence is

documented in other sources (such as the *Lü-shih Ch'un-ch'iu*, The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü), and it is now agreed that Lieh-tzu was a real person.

The book *Lieh-tzu* contains materials that were written over a period of six hundred years, from the early Han to the Chin dynasties (between 200 BCE and 400 CE). There were twenty sections in the original collection; these were condensed into the eight sections we have today. During the hundred years or so after it was compiled, the *Lieh-tzu* did not receive the kind of attention that was given to the *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuangtzu*. Most scholars believed that its teachings were similar to those of the *Chuangtzu*, and that one could get an understanding of Taoism during the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–219 CE) periods by studying the *Chuangtzu*. Moreover, because the *Lieh-tzu* contained more stories than formal philosophical discussion, the book was further dismissed as a minor work. Even in the fifth century CE, after many Taoist books had been written, the *Lieh-tzu* remained obscure. If not for the efforts of a scholar of the Eastern Chin (317–420 CE) who edited and wrote a commentary on it, the *Lieh-tzu* would have probably disappeared into oblivion.

When Taoism reached the height of its development in the T'ang dynasty (between the seventh and tenth centuries), the *Lieh-tzu*, *Lao-tzu*, and *Chuangtzu* were acknowledged as the three classics of Taoism. From then on, the *Lieh-tzu*'s place in the Taoist classics was firmly established.

The *Lieh-tzu* is a collection of stories and philosophical musings. Although the stories were set in the Spring and Autumn Period and the early years of the Warring States, its teachings reflected the kind of Taoism that was prevalent in the later years of the Warring States, the Ch'in (221–207 BCE), the Han (206 BCE–219 CE), and even the Wei (220–265 CE) and Chin dynasties (265–420 CE).

During those times, China was in a state of political and social chaos. As early as 600 BCE in the Eastern Ch'ou, rulers of the feudal states vied for power, first by diplomatic and covert means in the Spring and Autumn Period, and later in open warfare during the Warring States Period. The strong survived and the weak perished. It was the era of the "mercenary statesmen," the political and military advisors who offered their skills to the highest bidder. Politics were dirty. Family members spied on each other and assassinations were common. Treachery and intrigue were widespread among government officials. One could certainly lose one's life by playing the dangerous game of politics, but being virtuous and loyal did not guarantee safety. Under these circumstances, what could people do? Many chose to play the political game and accepted the risks, but some, like Lieh-tzu, preferred to stay out.

There had been hermits in China even before the Warring States, but they were individuals with their own reasons for abandoning society. It was only in

the *Lieh-tzu* that being a hermit or recluse was presented as an alternative way of life. Those who removed themselves from the social and political world might be able to survive and yet preserve their personal integrity.

As if things were not bad enough, the Warring States ended in the tyrannical rule of the Ch'in dynasty (221–207 BCE). In an attempt to crush opposition, the Ch'in emperor had scholars executed and books burned. The early years of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) provided a brief respite from the reign of terror, but after a hundred years of peace, court intrigues appeared again, and eventually Wang Meng, a powerful minister, removed the weak emperor, dissolved the Western Han, and founded his own dynasty (9–24 CE).

During the Western Han dynasty, Confucianism was favored by the emperors, who had hoped a philosophy that promoted propriety, virtue, and responsibility would create a stable social structure. That a minister should depose a monarch not only brought a blow to the political continuity of the Han dynasty, but also questioned the effectiveness of Confucianism in maintaining the established social structure. Disillusioned with Confucianism, many of the intelligentsia abandoned it for Taoism, which at that time advocated noninvolvement in politics and focused on individual cultivation.

Although the Han dynasty was revived after Wang Meng was defeated and killed, peace was short-lived. In less than forty years, court intrigues appeared again, this time more vicious than ever, as eunuchs became powerful players in court politics. Factions within the higher levels of government fought each other for control of young, weak emperors, and assassinations and treachery once again became the way to deal with rivals.

In an attempt to wipe out the eunuchs, one of the generals, Yüan-shao, enlisted the help of a barbarian chieftain, but the plan was uncovered and Yüan-shao himself was killed. When the barbarian armies arrived at the capital, they wiped out the eunuchs, looted and burned the countryside, and refused to leave. Out of this chaos came Ts'ao-ts'ao, an ambitious minister who ousted the barbarians, made himself regent, and took control of the emperor. This was followed by some fifty years of civil war when the Three Kingdoms of Wei, Shu, and Wu fought for control of the country.

Ts'ao-ts'ao was victorious in the end. His son established the Wei dynasty (220–265 CE), but a generation later, the Ssu-ma clan rose to power, killed everyone who stood in their way, and created the Chin dynasty (265–420 CE).

During these times, life was precarious at best. In the Warring States, one could survive by staying out of politics. In the later Han and Wei dynasties, staying out was not an option. To the Ssu-ma clan, staying out meant that you did not support them. Not supporting them meant you opposed them, and if you

opposed them, you had to be removed.

It was a time when being virtuous and loyal could not save you, being scheming and unscrupulous could cost you your life, and wanting to disengage yourself from the situation could kill you. Under these circumstances, what could you do? If your life was in danger every minute, why make plans for tomorrow? Why not acknowledge that life is short, that you have no control over destiny, and that wealth, renown, and social reputation are not worth sacrificing a single strand of your hair for? It was these social and political conditions that gave rise to the philosophy discussed in the Yangchu chapter of the *Lieh-tzu*.

Perhaps the lives of a group of people known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove best illustrate this outlook on life. These seven friends met often in a bamboo forest and spent their time singing, playing music, improvising poetry, and drinking. Their poetry and song spoke of the transient nature of life and the emptiness of wealth and renown. To them, the social conventions and rules of propriety set up by Confucianism were far worse than political imprisonment. These social rules stifled freedom of thought, action, and feeling. The life of Liu Ning, one of the seven friends, was itself a rebellion against all the social conventions of his day. He stayed away from politics and shunned social life. He was unkempt, went around barefooted, and spent his time drinking and writing poetry. In one of his poems he wrote, "If I die by the roadside, just dig a hole and bury me there." In another of his drinking songs he quipped that it was better and safer to spend life in a drunken stupor than to be aware of what was happening in the world. Although the alternative way of life that the *Lieh-tzu* advocates does not go to these extremes, it has the same courage to laugh at empty people who pursue empty goals in life.

## Philosophy of the Lieh-tzu

What is the purpose of life? To some, the goal of living is to be a useful citizen and serve society and country, make a name for oneself, and contribute to the arts and sciences. However, when times are oppressive and social and political pressures threaten to dictate people's thoughts and actions, the wise will realize that many things in life are beyond their control. They do not want to trade their freedom and peace of mind for the life of anxiety that accompanies wealth and renown. It is this view of life that prompted the great Chinese poet Tu Fu to say, "No matter how famous you are, you must die someday" and the philosopher Yangchu to say, "In life we may be different, but in death we are all the same." This voice is echoed throughout the *Lieh-tzu*, as it advises us that name, title, and

social reputation are not worth sacrificing our physical health and mental well-being for.

Most people think all Taoists are hermits who withdraw from worldly matters. This is not accurate. In the history of China, not all Taoists were recluses. Some were active in political and social establishments. They worked closely with the government and received imperial support. During the Yüan dynasty (1271–1368 CE), under the leadership of Ch'iu Ch'ang-ch'un, the Complete Reality School of Taoism supported the emperor and served the country as official spiritual advisors.

There were also Taoists who were not satisfied with the status quo but believed changes could be made through reforms within the existing political and social system. The great Taoist scholar and sage of the Sung dynasty (907–1279 CE), Chen Hsi-yi, was such a person. He did not serve as spiritual advisor in any official capacity, but his proposals for social and political reform were adopted by the emperor. His most famous proposal to the Sung emperor involved preserving Hua-shan as a Taoist sanctuary.

Then there were Taoists who did not accept the status quo but did not believe in reform. Instead, they sought to replace the established system through rebellion or revolution. The Yellow Turban rebellion of the Eastern Han dynasty, led by the followers of Chang Tao-liang—the man who was reputed to have turned Taoism from philosophy into religion—was an example. A more recent example was the Boxer Uprising at the turn of this century, which involved Maoshan Taoists (a sect that advocated magical practices).

Finally, there were Taoists who neither supported the status quo nor believed reform and revolution were viable options. They did not want to be a part of any group, whether it was for or against the establishment. These were the hermits or recluses, and their way of life is presented in the *Lieh-tzu*.

Even hermits have different reasons for choosing a life of noninvolvement. There were those who became hermits as a protest against the established government, like Po-yi and Shu-ch'i who would rather starve to death in the wilderness than serve an enemy lord. There were people who decided to become hermits because they were weary or disillusioned with the world, like the Taoists Lao-tzu and Lü Tung-pin. Then there were people like Lieh-tzu who became hermits not because of disappointment or as a protest against the establishment. Rather, they were recluses by natural inclination.

Lieh-tzu was a natural hermit. From the scanty information we have about him, we are told that, unlike Lao-tzu, he never held an office. Unlike Lü Tung-pin, he never aspired to hold an office or succeed in politics. It was his natural disposition to live a simple and quiet life away from the muddy affairs of the



world.

What, then, were Lieh-tzu's teachings? They are presented in the book's eight chapters. Following is a summary of the main ideas of each section.

## PART ONE. The Gifts of Heaven: About the Nature of the Tao and the Origin of Things

All things originate from the Tao, the undifferentiated primordial vapor that gives life to all things. There are four stages to creation: The Primal Oneness, when all things are undifferentiated from one another; the Primal Emerging, when the Primordial Vapor has taken form and everything lies in its embrace; the Primal Beginning, when yin and yang energies interact to produce the forms and shapes of things; and the Primal Substance, when forms assume qualities and defining characteristics.

Humanity is a product of the interaction of yin and yang energies, and, like all living things, we go through the cycle of birth, growth, and death. Thus, birth and death are natural occurrences and should not be fought against. Because we owe our existence to the Tao, we do not possess our bodies, nor do we have any control over our destiny. All things come and go naturally. What must come will come without our help, and what must go will leave no matter how hard we try to prevent it. This is the Way of the Tao. Only those who understand this can be free from the anxieties of birth, growth, and death.

## PART TWO. The Yellow Emperor: About the Nature of Yielding

In Part Two, Lieh-tzu talks about the art of yielding. The rigid branch of a tree will snap in a strong wind, but the soft, bending limb will survive the storm. Knowing how to react to strength with yielding and how to absorb force with softness is the key to survival.

In Lieh-tzu's times, the small countries could only survive by not opposing force with force, and a person could only stay alive by not butting against strong powers. As Lao-tzu had taught, "Of all things, nothing is softer than water, and yet it can wear down rocks." This is also what Lieh-tzu advises. While water can flow through the smallest cracks in the rocks, branches and tree trunks are broken or stopped by boulders.

Yielding is also the secret to transcending the limits of body and mind. Only those who do not fight the elements can merge with them; in doing so, they can stay under water and not drown and walk through fires and not be burned.

Finally, yielding to the natural occurrence of life and death and gain and loss

will prepare us for whatever may happen. We will not be excited over gain and sad over loss. Unhindered by fear, anxiety, or excitement, we will be free to say what naturally comes from our mouths, think what naturally comes to our minds, and do what naturally comes from the heart.

### PART THREE. King Mu of Ch'ou: About the Nature of Reality

Here, Lieh-tzu questions the conventional view of reality and asks, "What is real?" In this he echoes Chuangtzu's "Am I dreaming that I am a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a human?"

For Lieh-tzu, reality is not as permanent as we think it is. The boundaries of real and unreal, waking and dream are fuzzy. Therefore, why put so much importance on impermanent things such as fame and fortune? Why push ourselves to unnecessary extremes and suffer anxiety and misery in the name of virtue or honor? Besides, taking a light-hearted approach to what is real and what is not real can help us to be less attached and involved. As a result, like the homesick man who realized that he got upset over nothing, we may understand that how we feel depends on what we believe.

### PART FOUR. Confucius: About the Nature of Enlightenment

According to Lieh-tzu, the difference between an enlightened and an unenlightened person is in the relationship of mind and body and of self and other. The sage Kang-sen-tzu could see and hear without eyes and ears because his mind was in tune with everything around him. Sometimes enlightened individuals hide their skill, like the Earl of Kung-yi. Sometimes, like Nan-kuo-tzu and Kung-sun Lung, they behave to the contrary, presenting strange arguments and speaking in paradoxes to awaken others from ignorance. But in all cases, the sage neither criticizes nor makes fun of others. And above all, to the enlightened person, enlightenment is a common and ordinary experience attainable by all.

### PART FIVE. The Questions of T'ang: About the Nature of Attitude

In this section, Lieh-tzu talks about attitude and how it affects us. There are attitudes that will destroy us, like pride, competitiveness, and vengeance. There are attitudes that free us from anxiety and stress, like nonattachment, calmness, and inner peace.

Whether or not something is considered shocking is a matter of attitude.

Understanding and communication also depend on attitude. If we listen with a quiet mind and do not let our ideas distract us, we will understand others even before words are spoken. People who insist on clarifying semantics deliberately will destroy this attitude and limit communication to speech and words, and no spontaneous or intuitive understanding will be possible.

Learning also requires the right attitude. Whether we are learning the arts or sciences or mastering a physical or mental skill, we need to dissolve the barrier between ourselves and what is learned. Practice requires the ability to translate intention into action, which in turn requires the body to be spontaneous and responsive and the mind to be still and clear. Therefore, in all learning, the training of body and mind are equally important. If the mind is still but the body is not responsive, no intention can be communicated to the body. If the body is responsive and the mind is confused, the actions will come out confused.

Finally, teaching also requires a certain attitude. A true teacher is one who recognizes his or her limitations. How many teachers or experts today can be like Confucius, who could admit to the children that he did not know the answers to their questions?

## PART SIX. Effort and Destiny: About the Nature of Events

According to Lieh-tzu, fortune and misfortune and life and death come of their own without any direction or control from us or from a supreme being. Given this, why worry over things that we cannot do much about? Why try to predict what may happen and anticipate with anxiety?

Lieh-tzu does not suggest that we should be morbid and embrace fate. He feels we would be kinder to ourselves if we do not kill ourselves trying to make things happen or prevent them from happening. Very often, we feel secure when we think we have looked at a situation from all perspectives or feel that all contingencies have been provided for. But this sense of security is false, because no one can guarantee what will happen and what will not.

The emperor of Ch'in built the Great Wall and silenced opposition in an attempt to make his empire last forever, but his dynasty fell after his death. We can try to take precautions and make things secure for our successors or children, but it is not guaranteed that things will turn out the way we want.

Finally, Lieh-tzu advises us that since we have no control over external circumstances, the only thing we can do is control our reactions to them. Therefore, the less attached we are to events around us, the less we will be drawn in emotionally. To Lieh-tzu, accepting destiny is not submitting to fate. It is acknowledging that many things are beyond our control and that we are not

movers of events. The world does not revolve around us. Like everything else, we are only a part of the unfolding of events.

## PART SEVEN. Yangchu: About Personal Freedom

The message of Part Seven is very simple and straightforward. Life is short and transient, fame and renown are empty, and social rules and conventions stifle personal freedom.

The Yangchu chapter is often considered an anomaly in the *Lieh-tzu*. However, as we examine the teachings of Yangchu closely, we realize they extend the Taoist ideas of nonaction and simplicity to the question of personal freedom. Yangchu is against all restraints on personal freedom. To him, rules, regulations, norms, and social achievements such as fame, respect, renown, and reputation are all obstacles to freedom of thought, action, expression, and feeling. His approach to life is very blunt and simple—live your life and don't let others boss you around. Live according to your principles and not somebody else's.

However, Yangchu's philosophy is not the irresponsible hedonism that many people make it out to be. Yangchu counsels us to do only enough to live a contented life. Know when to stop, or you will lose everything.

Finally, Yangchu has some very insightful ideas on making the world better, or "saving the world." He thinks if people were not so eager to play hero or savior and would leave things alone, the world might be better off. Some people think this kind of noninvolvement is selfish and uncaring. However, many atrocities have been committed in the name of "making things better." If we ask, "Who is making things better for whom?" and "By whose standards?" we will begin to understand Yangchu's point of view. Native cultures have been destroyed because some people thought things would be better for indigenous peoples if they became "civilized." Genocides have been committed because someone thought the world would be a better place if certain ethnic groups were exterminated. When we look at the many things that have happened in the name of making the world a better place, Yangchu's assertion that he would not sacrifice a strand of hair for the benefit of the world is probably not the selfish and uncaring attitude it is made out to be.

## PART EIGHT. Explaining Coincidences: About the Relationship of Things

Whether we view events as cause and effect, a response to a situation, reward or

retribution, a mere coincidence, or an accident depends on how we interpret relationships among things and events.

There are happenings that cannot be explained, so we attribute them to luck, or being at the right place at the right time. While many people do not consider luck to be a serious factor, Lieh-tzu thinks otherwise. If we are willing to admit that luck plays a role in our lives, we will be less pretentious about success and less depressed about misfortune. Similarly, by accepting that some things simply cannot be explained, we will be more likely to leave them alone and not try to make them happen or prevent them from happening.

### *Listening to the Lieh-tzu: The Hermeneutical Method*

In this book I have tried a different approach to presenting a Taoist text. Instead of a straight translation of the semantics of the text, I have decided to present the “voice” of Lieh-tzu. While books are read, voices are meant to be listened to.

In reading a text, we follow a train of thought linearly, analyze it, and impose our meaning on it. Often we are so busy talking to ourselves that our own thoughts drown out the voice of the text. However, if we listen, our minds will become quiet and receptive, and the text can reveal meanings we would have missed had we tried to read it analytically. Listening to a text is especially appropriate if we are looking for practical advice on how to live. It allows us to approach a text with a willingness to learn.

Listening is the first step toward a dialogue with the text. The dialogue makes us active participants in unfolding the meaning of its teachings. As we listen, it speaks; as we speak to it, it listens and speaks again. This dialectical relationship continues, and the text becomes a friend and an advisor. Personally, I felt that the teachings of the *Lieh-tzu* only became meaningful to me after I entered into this relationship with the text.

Taoist texts contain philosophy that is meant to be lived. When we read the books of Taoism, we are hoping the teachings can awaken us, enlighten us, and guide us in our lives. More than any other text, the *Lieh-tzu* presents a philosophy of practical living whose message is best understood if we listen to the text rather than read it.

This book is an attempt to allow Lieh-tzu to speak to us as if he were here. It hopes to communicate the intention of the text by allowing the text to speak for itself. This method of presenting a text is called “opening” a text, and it is by no means new. It is part of the discipline of hermeneutics, a technique that has been used primarily in interpreting the meaning of religious texts.

The major ideas of hermeneutics are as follows:

1. A text has many levels of meaning. The meaning carried in the semantics of the text is the surface meaning.
2. A deeper level of meaning is expressed in *how* the words are spoken, not just *what* is spoken in the text.
3. Even deeper levels of meaning are carried in the “intention” of a text, which is its “voice.”
4. The deeper levels of meaning can be grasped by listening.
5. Religious and spiritual texts tend to have many levels of meaning. The goal of hermeneutics is to “open” the text so that the levels of meanings can be revealed.

I first encountered the hermeneutical method as an undergraduate. I was studying Heidegger, and my philosophy professor at the time, Walter Wright, encouraged me to look into hermeneutics as a method of understanding Heidegger’s philosophy. It was then that I discovered what a great difference it made to listen to a text rather than just read it. My interest in hermeneutics continued throughout my years in graduate school, and I attended the seminars of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, two of the greatest contemporary theorists of hermeneutics. However, it did not occur to me to apply a technique developed in Western philosophy and theology to Chinese philosophical texts. Perhaps my mind was too active then, and the texts of Taoism did not speak to me as they do now. As my Taoist training continues to give me more inner peace and stillness, I am now able to listen to the voice of a text more clearly.

*Lieh-tzu* is the first Taoist text to have spoken to me. Since it is a Chinese text, and Chinese is one of my first languages, my dialogue with it was in that language. “Opening” a text and presenting it in its original language is relatively straightforward. It is not necessary to deal with the semantics of two languages. Opening and presenting a text in a language other than its original one is much more interesting. One approach would be to translate it first in the conventional way and then open the translated text by listening to its intention or voice. My friends who work with Greek and Hebrew texts advised me to use this method. However, when I tried it, the method did not feel natural, so I decided to experiment with a different approach.

To me, wisdom is timeless and transcends language. At the same time, language can be used to open the meaning of a text. What if I could be freed from linguistic constraints, eliminate the process of translating from one language to another, and go directly from the teachings of the *Lieh-tzu* to its

voice in the English language? This would require being in the state of mind that Lieh-tzu must have been in, or at least being a kindred spirit to Lieh-tzu. Since I had been listening to the text for some time, this approach seemed promising.

With time, as I developed a kinship with Lieh-tzu, I began to feel what it was like to think the way he did. His teachings were no longer tied to a language. Sometimes he would speak in Chinese, sometimes in English, and sometimes not in any language in particular.

My next task was to find a voice for him in the English language. How would Lieh-tzu speak if he lived in an English-speaking country in our times? The voice would be natural, as if he were speaking in a first language and not a translated language. In this aspect, I am fortunate, because as a bilingual person with two first languages (English and Chinese), I am used to switching back and forth between the two languages when I think. Sometimes I would even forget which language I was thinking in. To give Lieh-tzu a voice in English, I had only to become a channel and let the *Lieh-tzu* come out naturally in the English language after I had totally immersed myself in its teachings. The emptier my mind, the clearer would be the voice of the text. Thus, opening a text and revealing its meaning require stillness of mind, quite the opposite of the analytical state of mind demanded in translation work.

### *The Voice of Lieh-tzu*

What, then, is the voice of the *Lieh-tzu*? To me, it is a friendly voice, a casual voice, and not the voice of an all-knowing sage or master. It is the voice of someone who gives advice not because he is an expert, but because he has made mistakes and learned from them. It comes from a person who allows us to listen. He speaks, pauses, and when we respond, he speaks again.

I do not get the same feeling when I read the *Lao-tzu*. Lao-tzu speaks as a sage who presents his ideas in an organized manner. I can almost imagine him lecturing from a podium. Moreover, when the lecture is over, there is no question period. It is up to us to understand him.

The *Chuangtzu* conveys yet a different feeling. Chuangtzu is an eccentric who chuckles to himself and is not concerned about being understood. Chuangtzu wanders in a world different from ours, completely removed from everyday affairs. He lives in a world where things come and go in fleeting moments, and the ground of reality is always changing. We can catch a glimpse of him now and then, but it would be impossible to stay at his side and talk to him.

The *Lieh-tzu* is different. Lieh-tzu lives in our world. He talks about

experiences we can understand. He speaks about life and death, fortune and misfortune, gain and loss, things we are concerned with, and problems we want to solve in our lives. He talks about the mad race for wealth and renown and the hazards of seeking social recognition. He scorns social pressure and the empty pursuits of the rich and famous. He talks about friendship, human communication, dreams, reality, and learning. He speaks things we do not dare to speak of, but when we listen to him, we may smile, laugh, or nod in agreement. The awakening from ignorance is not rude but soft. It is as if someone gently shook us and woke us from a deep sleep. Thus, while Lao-tzu talks at us and Chuangtzu talks to himself, Lieh-tzu speaks to us.

Lieh-tzu asks the kinds of questions we ask ourselves regularly: What is life and death? Why do things run smoothly for some people and not for others? How can we deal with anxiety and frustrations in our daily lives? How can we learn more effectively? What is happiness in life? Why are there so many problems in our world? Are material goods and social gains worthwhile? And he guides us in a direction where we may find the answers. It is only when we have found our answers to these questions that it makes sense for us to think about the nature of yin and yang, how these energies interact in the universe and in our bodies, how energy circulates in the body, and what it is like to merge with the Tao. In other words, the *Lieh-tzu* helps us to build the foundations that are necessary for the higher levels of Taoist training.

The *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuangtzu* talk about the state of enlightenment. They describe what it is like to merge with the Tao and be filled with the undifferentiated breath of the origin. We are not told how these sages attained enlightenment or what they had to go through. On the other hand, the *Lieh-tzu* shows us the struggles of a person who tries to become enlightened. We see Lieh-tzu fumble in his attempts; we see him laughing at himself. We see the kind of training he had to go through and the obstacles he had to overcome. We are shown what it is like on the path to enlightenment rather than what it is like after we get there.

While Lao-tzu and Chuangtzu no longer concern themselves with the world because they have transcended it, Lieh-tzu has to deal with very concrete problems, the same kinds of problems we would have to deal with if we were to embark on a spiritual path. He has to contend with social pressures, financial problems, the politics of his times, and his own self-doubt and self-centeredness. Lao-tzu and Chuangtzu do not tell us the problems they encountered along the way to enlightenment. When we meet them, they are already enlightened people, and they talk about what it is like after they have attained enlightenment. On the other hand, Lieh-tzu talks about the process of getting there. Knowledge of the



end state of spiritual training is certainly important, but knowledge of the steps in the process is invaluable. Moreover, because we can relate to the problems Lieh-tzu encountered, we find his enlightenment all the more real and believable.

The *Lao-tzu* describes a state of reality that a sage experiences; the *Chuangtzu* describes a state of mind that the sage is in; but the *Lieh-tzu* describes how the enlightened person lives. How many Taoist sages are willing to reveal experiences of their personal lives as an example to others? Lieh-tzu is not afraid to tell us that he spent a long time learning from the immortal Old Shang. He is not afraid to admit he was foolish in thinking he had mastered archery when he had not. Even when he was already a teacher, he admitted he enjoyed attention and flattery. His wife was not afraid to scold him, and he was not frustrated with her anger. All these things tell us that Lieh-tzu is a very approachable person. We do not need to make an appointment to see him, and we need not be afraid to tell him our problems or admit our stupidity. I also feel that Lieh-tzu is a humble person who does not want to make a splash in the world. How many sages, after they have become enlightened, can go back to their homes, help out with the housework and cooking, and do not want to be attended by students and admirers?

Many people do not take the stories in the *Lieh-tzu* seriously and write them off as fairy tales. But it is precisely because some stories are so removed from our everyday reality that they can talk about things we would otherwise find hard to accept. If the *Lao-tzu* is poetry and the *Chuangtzu* is prose, then the *Lieh-tzu* is a series of comic strips. By exaggerating the ridiculous aspects of human actions, it portrays the human condition as humorous and pokes fun at social taboos. When we laugh at humor in comic strips, we are in essence laughing at ourselves. Thus, while the *Lao-tzu* is the voice of serious wisdom and the *Chuangtzu* is the voice of crazy wisdom, the *Lieh-tzu* is the voice of humorous wisdom.

The philosophy in the *Lao-tzu* comes from above us; we can admire it and hope to follow it, but it is hard to reach. The philosophy in the *Chuangtzu* comes from a world that is very different from our own; we may try to grasp it, but it is too elusive to catch. The philosophy in the *Lieh-tzu* comes from where we are. It speaks to us at our level and talks about experiences we can relate to and understand.

Finally, the *Lieh-tzu* is a voice we can hear no matter where we are or what state of mind we are in. Some texts speak only in classrooms. Others present themselves best in a mountain retreat. Some texts speak to us when we are feeling down and others when we are calm and peaceful. I find that no matter

what state of mind I am in, the *Lieh-tzu* always has something to say. We can hear him speaking in busy streets during rush hour; we can hear him when we are working quietly in our gardens, or taking an evening walk, or even in the middle of a wild party. I am awed by Lao-tzu, baffled by Chuangtzu, but I am never afraid of Lieh-tzu.

### *About the Organization of This Book*

In “opening” a text, the intention of the teachings is the most important thing. The *Lieh-tzu* is already organized into eight sections, each with a theme, but I feel that each section can be subdivided naturally into units. I have provided a title for each unit so that the reader will find it easy to reread sections and reflect on them selectively. I have found this kind of organization extremely useful when I want to listen to selected parts of the text. When you have read the book through once, you will have a feel for each section and each unit, and you will know where to find the appropriate passage for your needs. I carry a copy of the *Lieh-tzu* around and it has taught and advised me at the most unexpected times. You may want to carry a copy of it in your backpack or bag. Read it when you are sitting in a commuter train. Read it in your tent waiting out a mountain storm. Read it while you are waiting for your plane. Read it by the fireside at home or during a break at work. Lieh-tzu speaks best when he becomes your companion.

Because this is not a translation of the *Lieh-tzu*, I have elaborated on some parts and amalgamated others. Moreover, I have omitted some Chinese names, especially those that are difficult to pronounce. In this way, I hope the continuity of listening to the text will not be disrupted. If Lieh-tzu were to speak to a Western audience, he would not have used obscure references to events in Chinese history or given his characters hard-to-pronounce Chinese names. However, I have kept the names that I feel are integral to maintaining the structure of the stories. The *Lieh-tzu* is a text that teaches us how to live. If the reader is bogged down with names and locations that are only familiar to people who lived in a certain culture at a certain time, it does not serve its purpose.

Many people have commented that they liked the way my book *Seven Taoist Masters* presented the teachings of Taoism; the only problem was that they were distracted by too many Chinese proper names that were hard to pronounce and remember. Since *Seven Taoist Masters* was a translation, I felt obligated to make it as close as possible to the original Chinese, thus probably sacrificing some of its effectiveness as a spiritual guide. I thank my readers for this very valuable

feedback. Since then, I have thought about ways of presenting the teachings of Taoism so that they are more accessible to non-Chinese readers. I feel the *Lieh-tzu* has given me an excellent opportunity to open the teachings of Taoism, not in the form of a translation, but in letting the text speak for itself.

I have found this project of opening the *Lieh-tzu* extremely enjoyable and rewarding. I have to admit it took more time and was more difficult than doing a translation, but I felt the experience was well worth it. I hope you will enjoy it too, and share with me the wonderful experience of listening to one of the greatest teachers of Taoism.

## *Part One / The Gifts of Heaven*

## INTRODUCTION

The ancients said that the giant Pan-ku created the world when he separated the sky and earth with a great ax. The mountains and seas fell into their places; grass and trees sprouted from the ground, and the animals began to roam the earth. But there were no humans. Then the goddess Nü took yellow dirt, mixed it with water from the springs, and fashioned a small figure. When she put it on the ground, this little thing jumped and ran and made strange noises with its mouth. Its name is “humanity.”

The ancient Chinese saw life as a gift from heaven and recognized that we are made of the same material as the mountains, earth, plants, and animals. Lieh-tzu, who understood this, said, “Your body does not belong to you; its form was lent to you by heaven and earth. Your life does not belong to you; it came into existence with the interaction of the energies of heaven and earth. Your mind and your spirit are not yours to control; they follow the natural ways of heaven and earth. Your children and grandchildren are not yours to possess; they are but the flakes of your skin, for procreation was granted to you by heaven and earth.”

Since life is a natural phenomenon, it is best to let it be. There is no need to spend time and effort trying to mold it or bind it with rules and regulations. On the contrary, we should use our time to cultivate ourselves so that we can “wander and not know where we are going, settle and not know what keeps us, and eat and not know how we are fed.” This is called “forgetting yourself,” and to achieve this state of mind is to attain the Tao.

## *That which is not born gives birth to everything*

LIEH-TZU WAS a humble and sincere person. His thoughts and actions tell us he was “uncommonly common.” He was unassuming and never displayed his learning. He lived a simple and quiet life and did not compete with others for recognition. Therefore, although he had lived in the kingdom of Cheng for forty years, people in positions of power saw him only as a common citizen. Throughout his life, Lieh-tzu never made a name for himself.

Without the burdens and problems associated with fame and fortune, Lieh-tzu could live leisurely and be free to do what he liked and go where he wanted. To Lieh-tzu, being an unknown citizen was better than being a person of power and responsibility. In a time when politicians played games of intrigue, Lieh-tzu felt it was better to remain silent and be truthful to oneself.

Of course, there are certain things that even a wise sage cannot escape. But, not being bound by custom and social convention, Lieh-tzu was able to deal with adversity much better than anyone else. One year, a famine occurred in Cheng, and Lieh-tzu decided to move to the kingdom of Wei to see if he could make a living there. Moreover, he thought this would give him an opportunity to travel to an unknown country and broaden his learning.

While Lieh-tzu was preparing to leave, a group of his students came to him. They were worried that their teacher might leave them for a long time. They knew Lieh-tzu did not follow any routine, and, if the mood suited him, he might wander for months or years before returning. Therefore, they wanted their teacher to give them some words of wisdom before he departed.

Lieh-tzu was not a person given to casual chatting. After his students begged him tirelessly for half a day, he finally said, “Think about this. Old man sky never says a word, but we can see that everything has its place in the universe. Nature has a lot to teach us. All you need is to open your eyes and look. The changes you see in nature follow a course. The four seasons behave in a regulated way. In truth, all human matters follow the same principles as the workings of heaven and earth. What more is there for me to say?”

His students were not satisfied and continued to pester him with questions. One student said, "Sir, even if you feel there is nothing for you to say, you can at least tell us what your teacher Hu-tzu taught you." Lieh-tzu was silent for a while. Then he smiled and said, "Actually, my teacher Hu-tzu did not say much. He told us to let everything go according to its natural way. However, I did remember a few things he mentioned to some of my fellow students. I'll share them with you now."

Here is what Master Hu-tzu taught:

There are many things in the universe that we don't understand. For example, some plants and animals require help from others to grow and survive, while others don't. We humans rely on plants and animals for food. We also need some of our community to farm the land and raise the livestock to sustain the rest of us. On the other hand, cacti can grow in the most hostile conditions and do not need much support to survive. In general, those that do not depend on the external environment for support will find it easier to survive than those that do. They will not die when their supporting environment disappears.

However, we should not look down on those who need to depend on others for survival. We should let them grow naturally in their own way, for their mode of living has its place in maintaining the balance of the universe. If we tried to change their way of life, we would upset the balance of things, and the order of the universe would be disturbed.

All things have their place in the universe, whether it is active or passive, moving or not moving. They fulfill their function in the world simply by being what they are. Everything plays a part in the process of creating, nourishing, transforming, and destroying. The creation of one thing is the destruction of another, and the destruction of one thing is the creation of another. In this way, life carries on in the universe. In every moment there is birth and death and there is coming and going. This process never stops.

THE BOOK OF THE YELLOW EMPEROR says, "The Valley Spirit that does not die is the Mysterious Female. It is the foundation of heaven and earth. It continues forever and cannot be used up." Because the valley is hollow, it can hold the spirit, it can embrace, and it can nourish. Because the valley is empty, it is not subject to birth and death. To transcend birth and death is to enter into the Limitless (*wu-chi*) and be at one with the origin of heaven and earth.

The Gate of the Mysterious Female is where all things are created. And yet heaven and earth are said to be born from the not-born. This is what is meant by "that which is not born gives birth to everything," for the Mysterious Female is that which is not-born. Its origins belong to the realm of nondifferentiation,

where there is neither birth nor death. Because it is never born, it never dies. Because it never dies, its energy lasts forever. It is in heaven and earth, and heaven and earth do not know it. It is in all things, yet all things do not recognize it.

If we understand that birth and death are part of the natural order of things, we will know that our lives cannot be controlled by our own efforts, and coming and going are not our own doing. At birth, we take a shape and form; in growth, we undergo development and change; and when our course has run out, we dissolve and return to where we were before we were born.

If we know the order of things, we will understand that when intelligence and wisdom have reached their zenith, they will begin to fade and decay. The rise and fall of shapes, colors, thoughts, and feelings are not subject to control. Because we don't know whence they come or where they go, we can only say that everything that is born comes from the not-born.



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*All things are connected and come from the same origin*

LIEH-TZU FELT that his students did not quite understand what he said, so he continued:

“The ancient sages used yin and yang to talk about the nature of things. They described changes in heaven and earth as the interaction of yin and yang. They said that the Nameless gives birth to the Named and that the origin of heaven and earth lies in that nebulous and unfathomable realm where all things are undifferentiated from each other.

“How do things emerge from this unfathomable and undifferentiated realm? They go through four stages: the Primal Oneness, the Primal Emerging, the Primal Beginning, and the Primal Substance.

“The Primal Oneness is the state in which all things are undivided and undifferentiated. There is no subject and object, no shape and form. In the Primal Emerging, the Primordial Vapor (ch’i) covers heaven and earth. Yin and yang have not divided, and everything lies within the embrace of the Vapor. In the Primal Beginning, yin and yang divide, and their interaction produces limited but identifiable shapes and forms. In the stage of the Primal Substance, things have not only assumed definite shapes and forms but have taken on qualities. They are hard or soft, light or heavy, moving or still.

“Although each thing is said to have its own essence of life, shape, and quality, these three entities are inseparable. They are all connected to the undifferentiated origin. Despite all apparent differences, all things are connected with each other and with their origin, the Tao.

“The Tao is formless and cannot be seen or heard. What we see or hear are only the manifestations of the Tao. That is why the ancients said, “Try to see it and it is not there; try to hear it, and there is nothing.” Because the Tao cannot be grasped by our mundane senses, it is futile for us to use ordinary perception to discover the Tao. The Primal Origin has no essence, no form, and no substance. From its undifferentiated oneness, it divides into unaccountable myriad things,

and yet in an instant, all things can return to the original oneness.

“In the Primal Beginning, the pure and light vapor rises to become heaven, and the muddy and heavy vapor sinks to become earth. It is from the harmonious interaction between the pure and the muddy, the light and the heavy, that humanity came into being. Thus, we are products of the vapor born from the copulation of heaven and earth. We are interconnected with all things—plants and animals, heaven and earth—because all things trace their origins to and owe their existence to the Primal Oneness.”

## *Heaven and earth have their strengths and weaknesses*

LIEH-TZU SAID:

“Although we owe our existence to heaven and earth, we cannot say they are all-powerful, because heaven and earth cannot do everything. Similarly, although the sages can tell us about the past and show us the future, they are not all-knowing.

“The sky provides cover and shelter but cannot support and hold. The earth provides support but does not cover and shelter. This is why we say that heaven and earth have their strengths and weaknesses.

“The role of heaven is to cover, the role of the earth is to support, and the role of the sage is to teach and inspire. All things have their function, and to force them to do something they were not meant to do would go against the natural way of things. That which can give shelter cannot provide support, that which can give support cannot teach and inspire, and those who teach and inspire cannot make things behave counter to their function. This is the natural way of the universe. In this way, humanity can be taught, earth can be sheltered, and heaven can be supported. Understand this, and you will see that stillness and movement are simply qualities of things, just as roundness and squareness are kinds of shapes. No one thing is more valuable than another, and no one person is more worthy than another.

“The workings of heaven and earth do not depart from the principles of yin and yang. The teachings of the sages can be summed up by virtue and justice. All things can be classified as either hard or soft. In this way, everything follows its natural course and fulfills its natural function. Therefore, we can conclude that there are those who are born and those who give birth; there are shapes and those that mold shape; there are sounds and those that make sound; there are colors and those that make color; and there are flavors and those that produce flavor. In fact, when something that is born dies, that which gave it life continues. While formed shapes are concrete and real, that which shaped them

does not exist. While sounds are heard, that which made the sound has not yet begun to resonate. While colors are seen, that which does the coloring has not appeared. Flavors have been tasted, but that which produced the flavors has not revealed itself. These are all examples of the absence of effort.

“If you understand what it means to be effortless, then there is nothing you cannot do. You can be yin or yang, hard or soft, short or long, round or square, hot or cold; you can live or die, float or sink, strike a high pitch or low, appear or disappear, take on colorations of black or yellow, become sweet or bitter, and be fragrant or pungent. By knowing and doing nothing, you can know all and do all.”

## *Life and death*

LIEH-TZU LEFT his home in Cheng and journeyed to the kingdom of Wei. While walking down a dusty road, he saw the remains of a skull lying by the wayside. Lieh-tzu saw that it was the skull of a human that was over a hundred years old. He picked up the bone, brushed the dirt off it, and looked at it for a while. Finally, he put the skull down, sighed, and said to his student who was standing nearby, "In this world, only you and I understand life and death." Turning to the skull he said, "Are you unfortunate to be dead and are we fortunate to be alive? Maybe it is you who are fortunate and we who are unfortunate!"

Lieh-tzu then said to his student, "Many people sweat and toil and feel satisfied that they have accomplished many things. However, in the end we are not all that different from this polished piece of bone. In a hundred years, everyone we know will be just a pile of bones. What is there to gain in life, and what is there to lose in death?"

The ancients knew that life cannot go on forever, and death is not the end of everything. Therefore, they are not excited by the event of life nor depressed by the occurrence of death. Birth and death are part of the natural cycle of things. Only those who can see through the illusions of life and death can be renewed with heaven and earth and age with the sun, moon, and stars.

## *Shadows, sounds, and ghosts*

THE ACTION OF one thing produces effects on another. In a universe in which all things are interconnected, this is just natural. Thus, a shape and its shadow, a sound and its echo are always together. When there is action, there is effect. When there is effect, there is a response in action.

*The Book of the Yellow Emperor* says, “When a shape moves, it produces a shadow, not another shape. When a sound resonates, it produces an echo, not another sound. Stillness does not generate stillness but movement.”

Although things differ in appearance, they all come from the same origin and will return to the same source. Some things may linger longer than others, but all things will eventually return to what they were before they came into existence. People use the words “beginning” and “end” to describe the start and end of things. However, “beginning” is really the event of coming together when energy gathers, and “end” is simply the dissolution of that energy. That which came together can easily dissolve if conditions become unfavorable. That which has dissolved may come together again if the circumstances are appropriate. Therefore, who is to say that there is a beginning and an end?

Life and death follow a natural course, and we should let it come and go accordingly. The problem for many people is that when it’s time to go, they still hang on, and when it’s time for something to come into the world, they prevent it. This is going against the natural order of things. That is why the ancients say that what must come will come, and what must go will go. People try too hard to make things happen or not happen, because they do not understand the natural order of things. They believe they can control the outcome of things, and in the end, after a lot of effort, they find their hard work produces the opposite effect.

Our spirit is the product of heaven and our bones are the products of earth. When the two cannot be together anymore, each will return to its source. That which is pure and light will rise and float to heaven, and that which is muddy and heavy will sink and be absorbed into earth. When this happens, we say that a person has become a ghost. In Chinese, the word for ghost is *kuei*, which also

means “return.” Thus, becoming a ghost means returning to heaven and earth. Therefore, death is not the end of things, but a return to the origin. At death, the components making up a person go their own way, returning to what they were before they became parts of a person.

Our time in this world is a journey through the cycle we call life. As guests, we linger for a while in this realm before we depart for another. And who can tell how long this traveler will stay in the next realm before embarking on another visit to the realm of the living?

## *The stages of life*

WE CAN DIVIDE the life span of a person into four periods: infancy, youth, old age, and death. In each of these periods, major changes occur.

In infancy, our blood is strong and our energy is plentiful. Mind and body, thought and action are one. Everything we do is in harmony with the natural order. The infant is not affected by things that happen around him. Virtue and ethics cannot restrain his will. Naked and free of social conventions, he follows the natural path of the heart.

In youth, our blood rises and becomes volatile. Desire, worry, and anxiety increase. External circumstances now direct the rise and fall of emotions. Will and intention become constrained by social conventions. Competition, conflict, and scheming are the norm in interactions with people. The approval and disapproval of others become important, and the honest and sincere expression of thoughts and feelings is lost.

In old age, the strength of our blood begins to decline. Consequently, desire and worry also weaken. Compared to the youthful years, we are more peaceful and at ease with ourselves. Social conventions and external influences have less impact on us because we are no longer interested in heroics and competition. Although the older person is not as harmonious with the natural order of things as the infant, he is certainly more truthful to himself than when he was a youth.

At death, everything returns to stillness. At this time, we know nothing, do nothing, and feel nothing. Our energy is again united with its source.

Confucius also talked about stages in life. He divided life into three periods. He said, "In youth, our blood and energy are unstable. Therefore, in this period we need to tame our sexual desire. In maturity, our blood and energy are strong and aggressive. Therefore, in this stage of life, we need to tame our competitive nature. In old age, our blood and energy are weak. Therefore, in our final years, we need to dissolve our attachment to things."

Both the Taoists and the Confucianists give valuable insights into human nature and the changes that occur in our lifetime. For the Confucianists, the



important thing is to understand what must be done in each period of life so that we can be useful to society, live honorably, and interact harmoniously with others. For the Taoists, the important thing is to understand that infancy, youth, old age, and death are stages of life that we must pass through. Understanding this, we can accept the changes we go through and view them as a natural sequence of events in the cycle of birth and death.

*Life is hard work, death is rest*

CONFUCIUS AND HIS STUDENTS passed through the village of Cheng when they went to see the sights of Mount T'ai. In the village they saw a man wandering around singing and playing a lute. The man had a deerskin for a coat and a rope for a belt. He seemed happy and carefree as he walked and sang.

Confucius was curious about why the man was so happy and contented. He walked up to him and said, "Sir, why are you so happy with life?"

The man replied, "There are many reasons for me to be happy. First, of all the things created in the universe, only humanity is blessed with the gift of wisdom. Since it is my fortune to be a human, this is a reason for me to be happy. Second, in my society, men seem to have more privileges than women. Since I am a man, this is another reason for me to be happy. Third, not many people live long lives. Yet I am gifted with health and a life span of ninety years. This is the third reason for me to be happy. Finally, I don't care whether I am rich or poor, and I know that birth and death are but the natural order of things. While many people are worried about being poor and are afraid of dying, I am not bothered by these things. That is why I am always happy."

After hearing this, Confucius was impressed. He turned to his students and said, "Now, here is a wise man who knows how to cope with life!"

On another occasion, when Confucius was on the road to the kingdom of Wei, he met a hermit who was at least a hundred years old. In the warmth of spring, this man was wearing a fur coat and was gathering grain that had been dropped by the farmers in the fields. The man was singing as he worked.

Confucius observed him for a while, and then said to his students, "This old man is quite a person and should be well worth talking to. Who would like to go and see what he has to say?"

Tzu-kung volunteered and walked toward the embankment along the field. He waited for the old man to approach, and when they were within speaking distance, Tzu-kung said, "Sir, you are old and tired, and you still have to toil and sweat to make a living. You have all my sympathy!" The old man ignored Tzu-

kung's remark and continued along the field, picking up grains and singing.

Tzu-kung realized something was wrong, so he caught up with the old man and apologized. The old man then looked at Tzu-kung and said, "Why am I so pathetic that you should feel sorry for me?" Tzu-kung ventured to say, "Well, sir, I thought maybe you did not work hard when you were young, and in your adult years you did not care to make a name for yourself. As a result, you have no wife and children to look after you. Now you are getting old and death is near. You laugh and sing, and you don't even realize that you have wasted the best years of your life."

The old man smiled and said to Tzu-kung, "I laugh and sing because I am happy. Think about this. If I had passed my youthful years straining body and mind, and if I had spent all my energy competing with others in my adult years, I would not have lived to be a hundred and be as healthy as I am now. As for not having a family, all the better. In this way, I will not have to worry about their livelihood when I die. I can even look forward to the day when I die. Can you tell me why I shouldn't be happy?"

Tzu-kung replied at once: "To want to live and to be afraid of death are part of human nature. You seem to be happy to die. I don't understand that."

The old man said, "Death and life are cycles of going and coming. When we leave one world, maybe we will be born in another world. Which is better, life or death? It is hard to tell. Now then, why should we make it hard for ourselves in this world when we don't even know whether we are better off living or dying?"

After Tzu-kung heard these words, he was very confused. He went back to Confucius and related everything the old man had said. Confucius only nodded, "Just as I had thought. It was worth finding out what this old man had to say. From his observations, it appears he has found his answers in life, but he has not found everything."

It was at this time that Tzu-kung grew tired of his studies and thought everything he did was futile. He went to Confucius and told his teacher he wanted to take a rest.

Confucius said, "As long as you live you will not rest."

"Then there is no place where I can find rest from my work?"

Confucius smiled a mysterious smile and said, "Yes, there are actually plenty of places where you can find rest. Look carefully in the graveyards, the deep valleys, and the high mounds. These are all places of rest."

Tzu-kung then exclaimed, "Oh, now I know why those of us who are living cannot know what it means to rest, because rest is only for the dead. Death is indeed something great! The contented person finds rest in death, and for the greedy person, death puts an end to his long list of desires."

Confucius then said to his student, “It looks like you have finally understood what is meant by ‘life is hard work, and death is rest.’ Most people think living is a happy business, but they don’t realize that sometimes living is more difficult than dying. Similarly, many people think old age brings loneliness and despair, but they don’t realize that sometimes in old age they can recover the carefree and happy life of their childhood. They only know that death is something horrible, but they don’t realize that death is a rest from hard labors.”

The sage Yen-tzu also understood the meaning of death. He said, “The ancients said that for persons who cultivated body and mind, and who are virtuous and honorable, death is an experience of liberation, a long-awaited rest from a lifetime of labors. Death helps the unscrupulous person to put an end to the misery of desire. Death, then, for everyone, is a kind of homecoming. That is why the ancient sages speak of a dying person as a person who is ‘going home’ On the other hand, a living person is a traveling person. Normally, if a traveler fails to find home when his journeys are over, everyone will agree that this person has lost his way. However, in the journey of life, many travelers only know how to wander but do not know how to return home. And yet people do not see that these travelers have likewise lost their way.

“If a man leaves his family and his livelihood and wanders far from home, everyone will say he is crazy and irresponsible. However, if a man appears to use his skill and intelligence to make a name for himself, and ensures that everybody recognizes his achievements, he is regarded as a great man. Actually, both men have strayed from their true nature. Only the sages can tell who has lost their original nature and who has retained it.”

## *The value of emptiness*

SOMEONE ASKED Lieh-tzu, “Why do you value emptiness?”

Lieh-tzu said, “Most people like to be praised. They feel good when their accomplishments are acknowledged. However, I feel we would be better off if we were empty of attachments and not imprisoned by recognition, approval, and disapproval. In the long run, we’d have fewer things to worry about. That’s why I value emptiness.”

Lieh-tzu paused and then continued, “Even if you were given credit for doing something, you should realize that it was not entirely your own doing. Events occur because conditions are right, and your action only contributes to one of the many conditions. We are accustomed to thinking that when things happen, they are our ‘accomplishments’; we don’t understand that there is actually nothing to accomplish. Therefore, rather than accept credit that does not belong to anyone, why not quiet down and think about the workings of heaven and earth?

“Seeing the emptiness of things can help us cultivate stillness and peace of mind. If you do not know how to keep still in this crazy world, you will be drawn into all kinds of unnecessary trouble. You will lose your view of the Way, and, when you realize it, it will be too late, for in losing the Way, you will have also lost yourself.”

Chuang-tzu once told a story about two persons who both lost a sheep. One person got very depressed and lost himself in drinking, sex, and gambling to try to forget this misfortune. The other person decided that this would be an excellent chance for him to study the classics and quietly observe the subtleties of nature. Both men experienced the same misfortune, but one man lost himself because he was too attached to the experience of loss, while the other found himself because he was able to let go of gain and loss.

## *Are things growing or decaying?*

HEAVEN AND EARTH are always changing. However, because these changes are so slow, we mistakenly think they do not occur. When something rises, something else will fall. When something grows, something else will decay. When something disappears, something else emerges. This is the balance of things. If there is only growth and no decay, the world will be overpopulated, be it with people, animals, or vegetation. If there is only decay and no growth, life will disappear. For the world to continue there must be a balance of growth and decay. If we interfere with the natural order of things by trying to control growth and decay, the balance of the universe will be lost. Only when things are left to their natural way will the balance be maintained.

The vapors of heaven and earth are not gathered in one instance. Mountains, seas, valleys, and rivers are not made or destroyed in one day. Changes in heaven and earth occur all the time. But because the changes are so gradual, the time between the coming and going of things is often imperceptible to us.

The appearance of a person also changes all the time. From childhood to death, the color of the hair, the facial features, skin texture, and even intelligence are always changing. Again, because the changes are so gradual, we are unaware of them occurring. We only see the results of the change after the fact and then infer that changes must have occurred.

*Worrying that the sky will fall*

IN THE KINGDOM OF Ch'i there lived an old man who was afraid the sky would fall and the earth would break up. He reasoned that if that happened, he would have nowhere to hide, and he would surely die. He was so worked up about it that he could neither eat nor sleep.

A friend tried to reason with him that there was nothing to worry about. The friend said, "Heaven is only the accumulation of vapor. This vapor surrounds us. We breathe it, we walk through it, and we stretch our bodies inside it. Why would it fall down?"

The old man was still uneasy. "What about the sun and moon? Even if the sky is made of vapor and will not fall down, the moon and the sun can still fall down and crush us."

"The sun and the moon are also made of vapor. The only difference is that they hold different light. Even if they fall, vapor and light are not heavy, and they will not crush us."

The old man was still worried. "But what about the earth? It may break up and disappear."

"The earth is made of grains and dirt. Dirt is everything. We walk on it, we jump on it, we sleep on it, we sit on it, and yet it does not give way. Why would it break up?"

The old man was finally satisfied. Feeling that everything was secure and safe, he was happy again. His friend was glad too, knowing that he had helped someone get rid of needless worries.

When the hermit Ch'ang-lu heard about this incident, he laughed and said, "Rainbows, clouds, mist, wind, rain, and the changes in the four seasons are all formed from vapor accumulated in heaven. Mountains, rivers, seas, minerals, metal, and stone are all formed from the accumulation of matter on the earth. If everything in heaven and earth is made of vapor and dirt, who is to say that they cannot be damaged or destroyed? For sure, heaven is wide and earth is great, but they are not permanent. However, if they were to perish, it would be aeons from

now. The man of Ch'i who worried about their destruction is probably too concerned about things in the distant future, but, on the other hand, he is actually not as crazy as we think he is."

When Lieh-tzu heard this he chuckled, "Master Ch'ang-lu thinks heaven and earth can be destroyed. I think he is wrong. It's nonsense even to think about whether heaven and earth can or cannot be destroyed. Whether they will perish or not is something we don't know. If heaven and earth will not perish, that's great. We can live our lives without worry. However, if they will perish, that's something we can't do much about, so why worry about it? While we live, we don't know what it's like to be dead. Likewise, when we are dead, we don't know what it's like to be alive. Those who were just born won't know that it's like for those who lived before them. Similarly, those who lived before us could not know what it's like to be in our times. Therefore, why let the question of whether heaven and earth will perish occupy our minds?"



*Life that is borrowed, wealth that is stolen*

KING SHUN ASKED his minister, “Can I possess the way of heaven and earth and make it go according to my wishes?”

His minister replied, “Even your body is not your own; how can you think about bending the way of heaven and earth to your will?”

“If my body does not belong to me, then to whom does it belong?”

“Your body does not belong to you; its form was lent to you by heaven and earth. Your life does not belong to you; it came into existence with the interaction of the energies of heaven and earth. Your mind and your spirit are not yours to control; they follow the natural way of heaven and earth. Your children and grandchildren are not yours to possess; they are like flakes of your skin, for procreation was granted to you by heaven and earth.

“A person who understands this truth is one who is not bound by the ideas of what a mind is and what a body is. Forgetting his body, he can travel anywhere in the world without knowing where he goes. Forgetting his mind, he can succeed in everything he does because he does not think about how it is done. He follows the way of heaven, going when he needs to go, staying without knowing what made him stay, and eating without knowing how he is fed.

“Life is but the coming together of the energies of heaven and earth, and the source of these energies has no beginning and no end. How can one ever possess the way of heaven and earth?”

IN THE KINGDOM of Ch’i lived a very rich man by the name of Kuo. In the land of Sung there was a very poor man by the name of Hsiang. Seeing the wealth of Kuo, Hsiang decided to pay the wealthy man a visit to see if he could learn how to get rich.

Kuo said, “Actually, there is not much to how I got rich. I simply stole. In the first year, I made enough to be self-sufficient. In the second year, I started getting rich. By the third year, I had saved up an enormous wealth. Since then, I have been able to help others who are in need.”

When the poor man heard this he was delighted. He latched on to the idea of stealing and did not bother to ask Kuo to explain the details of how he stole.

Hsiang started trying his skills at stealing. He climbed over walls and broke into houses. He helped himself to anything he could lay his hands on. Soon he had accumulated a good bit of wealth.

However, one time he was caught. He was punished severely and all his stolen goods were confiscated. Poor again, and angry at Kuo for giving him bad advice, he went to accuse the rich man of tricking him.

Upon seeing Hsiang, Kuo greeted him sincerely and asked how he was faring. Hsiang angrily told the rich man how he had followed his example of stealing and how it had ended in disaster.

Kuo sighed and said, "You never asked me what I stole to make myself rich. You heard the word 'steal,' formed your own ideas, and went about doing it your way. Of course you ended up in trouble. Let me tell you what I stole to get wealthy.

"I have heard that the four seasons have bountiful gifts. So I stole some gifts of the spring rain and the summer warmth for my crops. I also know the rivers and lakes have a lot of wealth, so I stole some fish for my fish pond and some waterfowl for my duck farm. I know the earth has much to give, so I stole some earth to build shelters for myself and my livestock. I know the woods have plenty of riches, so now and then I stole some wild game for food. Water, soil, animals, and crops all belong to heaven and earth. I do not possess any of them. Neither does anyone else. That's why I said I stole them to make myself rich. When I steal from heaven and earth, there is no retribution, because I know that no one owns these things. You, on the other hand, are foolish enough to steal other people's property. You took gold, jewels, silk, and grain that belonged to people. That is why you were punished by the laws of humanity."

Hsiang felt that Kuo was tricking him again. As he left the rich man's home, he met the sage Tung-kuo. Hsiang asked for an explanation of Kuo's speech. The learned man said, "Kuo did not steal in the common sense of the word. He understood that the gifts of heaven and earth are there for him to use, although he knows he cannot call them his own. He used the word 'stealing' to mean 'taking without the need to ask.' You, on the other hand, do not know this truth, and your ignorance caused you a lot of grief."

## *Part Two / The Yellow Emperor*

## INTRODUCTION

If life goes according to our wishes, we feel happy. The moment things do not go our way, we are annoyed. That is why only those who are not affected by external circumstances will always be calm. They follow the natural way and are not controlled by their reactions to happenings around them.

The Yellow Emperor visited a mythical land where there was neither leader nor government. The people lived according to the natural way and were not excited about birth or anxious about death. Everyone possessed incredible abilities and could stay under water and not drown or walk through fire and not be burned. Having reached the point where they could completely forget themselves, they were freed from the limitations of body and mind and could ride on the wind and float with the clouds.

The transcendence of mind and body yields abilities that would appear strange to ordinary people. In fact, someone who could walk through fire or stay under water would be considered to have magical powers, and many would give or do anything to acquire these abilities. They do not know that such skills are the by-product of letting go of body and mind and merging with the laws of nature.

Letting go begins with seeing through the illusion of external forms and social conventions. Those who are not attached to the mundane matters of the world will not be affected by social pressure, emotions, and desire. They know the way of heaven and are not bound by ideas of good and bad, right and wrong, and beauty and ugliness.

Finally, transcending mind and body requires discipline and patience, and when it is accomplished, only the enlightened individual will know that he or she has attained enlightenment. Without publicity or fanfare, enlightened beings continue their lives as ordinary people and live out the rest of their days in simplicity and contentment, unknown to the world and unaffected by its conventions.

### *The Yellow Emperor visits the immortal lands*

AFTER HE HAD RULED for fifteen years, the Yellow Emperor looked around his country to see what he had done. When he saw that his subjects respected and loved him, he was delighted. He felt he could now turn his energies to taking care of himself.

Retiring from the duties of government, the Yellow Emperor decided to do things to please his body and mind. He ate the best foods, had the best musicians entertain him, slept late, and did what he felt was enjoyable. However, as time went on, his skin darkened, his senses were dulled, he got bored, and his intelligence was slowed. Even his emotions got out of control.

So, for the next fifteen years, he took a different approach to life. He quit satisfying his senses and put all his energies into governing his country. Every day he worked hard and was anxious that he would not be a good ruler. As time went on, his physical health and mental state got worse. His skin became even darker, his senses got more dulled, his mind got even weaker, and his emotions became more volatile.

Seeing what he had gotten himself into, the Yellow Emperor sighed and said, "I pampered myself too much, and then pushed myself too hard. No wonder I lost my health and my inner peace."

After this, the Yellow Emperor decided to take a rest from court life. He felt he needed time to think, so he left the imperial court and lived in a simple hut in a corner of the palace grounds. He dismissed his servants and distanced himself from fancy foods, good music, and companionship. He stilled his mind and disciplined his body. For three months, he stayed away from the affairs of government.

One day, while dozing in the afternoon, the Yellow Emperor had a dream. He dreamed he had journeyed to a mythical kingdom in the West. These immortal lands were so far away from his own country that he could only get there in a dream state.

In this mythical land, there were no leaders and no teachers, for no one was

wiser than another. Not excited about life nor anxious about death, everyone lived a full and contented life. The people there did not have prejudices or preferences and did not know how to love or hate. They did not know what it means to feel attraction or repulsion, to approach or avoid, to take advantage or to ignore. Therefore, they never developed ideas of wanting and not wanting or liking and disliking.

Because there was nothing to welcome or dread, they could stay under water and not drown; they could walk through fire and not be burned. They could be cut with knives and they would not be wounded. They could be poked and scratched, and they would not feel the itch. They could float through space as if they were walking on solid ground. They could sleep on thin air as if it were a solid bed. Clouds and mist could not block their vision, thunder could not disturb their sense of hearing, and beauty and ugliness did not affect their judgment. Traveling in spirit, they could walk surefooted on treacherous paths in the mountains and valleys without fear of the precipitous heights.

When he awoke, the Yellow Emperor felt enlightened. He called his ministers and told them, "I have spent three months in seclusion trying to find out what is the best way to govern the country and cultivate myself. However, I did not become enlightened by trying to think things out consciously. I got enlightened in a dream. Now I know that the Way is not something that can be discovered by conscious thinking. It can only be attained when conscious thinking stops." The Yellow Emperor then related what he had dreamed to his ministers.

Twenty years later, the Yellow Emperor's kingdom was not much different from the mythical land he had visited in his dream. Not long afterward, the Yellow Emperor left the realm of the living and ascended to heaven, and all the people mourned the passing of a great ruler.

On the islands in the eastern seas are immortal beings who live on dewdrops and pinecones. They do not eat grain, they feed on the wind and vapor, and their minds are as clear and still as the mountain lake. They have ruddy cheeks and they all look like healthy children. They are open, friendly, and have no inhibitions. They all do their own chores and are helpful to others. There is no fear, no anger, no tension, and no dissatisfaction. No one is superior or inferior to anyone else. Everything is bountiful and everyone enjoys the providence of heaven and earth. The sun and moon send a gentle light, the seasons are never harsh, the earth is rich, and the inhabitants are kind. The deities bless the land, and the monsters never go near it. This is the land the Yellow Emperor visited in his dream.

*Riding on the wind, floating with the clouds*

LIEH-TZU HAD the immortal Old Shang for a teacher and the sage Pai-kao-tzu as a friend. After he had finished his training, he came home riding on the wind and floating on the clouds.

A man named Yin-sheng heard about Lieh-tzu's feat and wanted to learn this skill of riding on the wind. So he went to Lieh-tzu and asked to be his student. So intent was Yin-sheng on learning this skill that he stayed at Lieh-tzu's home and kept pestering the teacher with questions. This went on for several months, but Lieh-tzu only ignored him.

Yin-sheng began to get impatient and then angry that Lieh-tzu was not teaching him. One day, he left in a huff.

When Yin-sheng got home, he calmed down and realized he had been stupid and impulsive, so he went to Lieh-tzu and asked to be his student again. Lieh-tzu simply said, "Why did you come and then leave and then return?"

Yin-sheng said, "When I first came to ask you to teach me, you ignored me. So I got annoyed and left. Then I realized I was too impatient and reckless, so I came back to ask you to accept me as a student again."

Lieh-tzu said, "I had thought you were intelligent, but now I can see you are quite stupid. Listen to what I went through when I learned from my teachers."

Lieh-tzu said:

"When I asked Old Shang to be my master and Pai-kao-tzu to be my friend, I decided to work hard to discipline my body and mind. After three years, I was afraid to have notions of right and wrong, and I did not dare to speak words that might offend or please. It was only then that my master glanced at me and acknowledged my presence. Five years later, I thought freely of right and wrong and spoke freely of approval or disapproval. My master gave me a smile. Seven years later, my thoughts came naturally without any conceptions of right and wrong, and words came naturally without any intention of pleasing or offending. For the first time, my master invited me to sit by his side. Nine years later, no matter what came to my mind or what came out of my mouth, there was nothing

that was right or wrong, pleasing or offending. I did not even entertain the idea that Old Shang was my master and Pai-kao-tzu was my friend.

“It was then I became aware that there was no barrier between what was inside and what was outside. My body was illuminated by a bright light. I heard with my eyes and saw with my ears. I used my nose as mouth and my mouth as nose. I experienced the world with the totality of my senses as my spirit gathered and my form dissolved. There was no distinction between muscles and bones. My body stopped being heavy and I felt like a floating leaf. Without knowing it, I was being carried by the wind. Drifting here and there, I did not know whether I rode on the wind or the wind rode on me.”

He then looked at Yin-sheng and said, “You had only been here for less than an hour and you got dissatisfied that you were not taught. Look at your condition. The parts of your body do not cooperate; the vapors of heaven and earth do not enter your body; your joints and bones are so heavy that you can’t even move. And you want to learn how to ride on the wind?”

When Yin-sheng heard these words he was ashamed and did not ask again about riding on the wind.



## *The art of staying under water and walking through fire*

LIEH-TZU ASKED the sage Wen-tzu, “Why can the enlightened person stay under water and not drown, walk on fire and not be burned, and float on thin air and not fall?”

Wen-tzu said, “He does so not by skill and courage but by gathering the energy and focusing the spirit.

“We think anything that has shape, color, and sound is a thing. What makes one thing different from another? Its shape, color, and sound. And what are shapes, colors, and sounds? They are simply external features of things. If you can see through these external qualities of things, then you will realize they all have the same underlying structure, because they all come from the same origin. Once you transcend the external differences, anything can be merged with anything. Becoming one with the water, you will not drown; becoming one with the fire, you will not burn.

“To an enlightened person, the world is limitless. He hides in the realm where there is no beginning and no end, and he wanders leisurely where the myriad things appear and disappear. He purifies his original nature, he cultivates his energy, and he maintains his virtue. Unified with the laws of nature, he merges with the natural order of things. Thus, his spirit is not harmed, and things outside cannot penetrate him or harm him.

“When a drunk man falls off a cart, he is not severely injured. Why is this? The drunk man’s bones and flesh are the same as everybody else’s, but while the conscious man might be killed in the fall, the drunk man could escape without a scratch. This is because the drunk man is unaware of fear or death. To him there is no difference whether he is in the cart or falling off the cart. On the other hand, the conscious man stiffens up in fear when he falls because he is affected by what is happening around him. If you can lose the sense of self and other through wine, think of what truly forgetting yourself can do. The enlightened person merges with everything around him. Therefore, nothing around him can

harm him.”

## *The art of archery*

LIEH-TZU WANTED to show off his skill of archery to a friend. He drew his bow and placed a cup of water on his left forearm. Then he notched an arrow and let it fly. Before the first arrow hit the target, he had let off the second and the third. When he saw that all three arrows hit the center of the target, Lieh-tzu was quite pleased with himself. So steady was his hand and so focused was his concentration that the water in the cup did not spill.

His friend, however, was not impressed. He said to Lieh-tzu, "What you showed me was merely the skill of eye and hand, and not the state of mind of a true archer. Let's go up to the mountains and stand on the edge of a cliff. If you can shoot accurately under those conditions, then I shall be convinced of your mastery in archery."

The two went up to the mountains, and when they reached the top of a peak, Lieh-tzu's friend walked toward the edge of a cliff that dropped a thousand feet below. Standing with his back to the drop and with half of his foot over the edge, he invited Lieh-tzu to join him.

Lieh-tzu was already trembling when he saw his friend walk toward the edge of the cliff. Now, at the thought of standing with his back to an abyss, he fell on his face and broke into a cold sweat.

Lieh-tzu's friend then said, "The master archer can fire an arrow under any condition. Whether he sees the clear sky or faces the yawning abyss, he can still shoot with the same state of mind. He is not affected by conditions of life and death, for nothing can move the stillness of his mind. Look at yourself now. You are so scared that you can't stand up or look straight. How can you even begin to demonstrate the art of archery?"

## *Feats of power*

IN THE COUNTRY of Chin there lived an influential man by the name of Tzu-hua. Though not a government official by rank, Tzu-hua had power equal to that of ministers. He was favored by the king and he rubbed shoulders with the nobles. Those who were in good rapport with him received benefits, and those who fell out of his favor could never hope to find fortune.

Tzu-hua kept a large number of retainers and encouraged them to compete with each other in contests of physical and mental prowess. When the competitions led to death or injuries, Tzu-hua was not at all concerned. He let the stronger men bully the weaker ones and the smarter ones ridicule the slow-witted ones. Challenges and mockery were the norm in the region where his influence was felt.

One day, two of Tzu-hua's men were on an errand far from the city. When night fell, they found lodging at the house of an old farmer by the name of Shang. The two men talked all night about their master. They remarked that if anyone had the power to grant life or death, bestow fortune and misfortune, it was Tzu-hua. The old farmer overheard this and decided he would try to make his fortune by offering his services to this powerful man.

The next day, after the retainers had left, Shang borrowed some money and provisions from his neighbors. Wearing a straw hat and carrying a basket on his back, he went to Tzu-hua's mansion.

When he got there, he saw that all of Tzu-hua's retainers wore rich silks, rode fine horses, and had an air of arrogance. They looked at the old farmer with the dirty face and ragged clothes and began to tease him and push him around. They gave him the meanest tasks, they beat him up, and made fun of him all the time. However, no matter how they tried to bully him, Shang took the mockery and the beatings with a good nature. Soon, Tzu-hua's men got bored with their cruelty and left him alone.

One time, the retainers were standing on a platform high above the ground and were boasting about their feats and challenging each other. Shang was also there.

The men joked and said, "Whoever's brave enough to jump down from this scaffold will be awarded with one hundred pieces of gold." While they were goading and daring each other, Shang stepped forward and, without hesitation, jumped off the platform. He floated down and landed on his feet, unhurt. Tzu-hua's retainers were surprised, but they thought maybe this time Shang had been lucky.

So they led Shang to a bend in the river where the waters were deep and swift and told him, "Somewhere in those deep waters is a pearl. Whoever's brave enough to dive down and find it will keep that jewel." Shang immediately jumped into the river and went underwater. Not long afterward, he came back with a large and shining pearl in his hand.

After this, Shang began to earn the respect of Tzu-hua's retainers. They stopped pushing him around. Even Tzu-hua got word of Shang's abilities and started to give him the stipend of gold and cloth that the other retainers received.

One night, a fire broke out in a warehouse where the silks were kept. Tzu-hua arrived at the scene with his retainers. Seeing that he was about to lose a large fortune, the master said to his retainers, "I shall give a huge reward to the person who can get my silks out of that burning building."

Shang immediately rushed through the flames and started carrying bundles of silk and brocade out of the burning building. Fire and smoke did not seem to affect him. He walked through flames and burning debris and rescued all of Tzu-hua's wares.

After this feat, Shang was not only respected but admired. The retainers who had bullied him now apologized to him "We had no idea you knew magic and could do all these things that ordinary people could not do. We're sorry we were unkind to you and made fun of you when you first came. We tried to fool you into doing impossible tasks, and now we feel stupid for not recognizing that you are a man of power."

Others also crowded around Shang, congratulated him, and begged him to teach them the secrets of "flying through air," "staying under water," and "walking through fire."

Shang answered them, "I have no idea how I managed to do those incredible feats. There is really nothing magical about them. When I heard that one could make a fortune in the services of Master Tzu-hua, I came believing I would make a fortune. After I got here, there was no doubt in my mind that if I jumped down from the scaffold I would get rich, or that if I dived into the deep river, I would find jewels. It never occurred to me that those tasks were impossible. Now that you have told me you had originally set out to fool me, I shall be more reluctant to rush headlong into anything. I have discovered what it's like to be

afraid, and I am beginning to doubt whether I am indeed able to walk through fire or fly through air. From now on, no matter how much you reward me, I shall not jump from a tower, dive into deep water, or walk through a burning building.”

## *The art of taming tigers*

THE KING OF CH'OU had an animal caretaker by the name of Liang who was an expert in taming animals. This man was not only able to tame the more commonly domesticated animals like dogs and horses, but he was especially adept at taming wild animals such as tigers, wolves, and eagles and other birds of prey. The animals were so tame that he could let them roam around his courtyard. Female and male were not afraid to mate in his presence, and different species of animals lived comfortably side by side without conflict.

The king was very impressed with Liang and was afraid that such skills of animal taming would disappear when this man died. So he sent one of his servants to become Liang's apprentice.

When the new apprentice arrived, Liang said to him, "There isn't really much to taming wild animals. However, if I do not explain to you how I managed to tame these animals, the king will be mad at me. Now listen carefully. Animals have a unique nature. They do not fly into a rage or calm down for no apparent reason. The secret to taming wild animals is to understand their nature. Generally, if you do not rouse their ferocity, they will be calm; however, if you do something that goes against their nature, they will be enraged.

"Typically, a man who feeds tigers will not give them a live animal, because the tigers' ferocity will be aroused when they chase and tear at their prey. Moreover, he feeds the tiger when it begins to get hungry, not when it is very hungry or when it is full. In this way, the animal feels satisfied when it is fed. Tigers are different from people, and to tame them you need to understand their natural instincts and not go against them."

Liang continued, "Although I am careful not to make my tigers angry, I also do not let them have their way completely. If they get too happy or excited, they may become angry. You need to keep them in a balanced state, not too happy, and not discontented. It is because I do not go out of my way to make them happy or behave in such a way to provoke their rage that my animals feel that I am one of them. That's why they are content to stay in my gardens and do not

want to go back to the wilderness.”



### *The art of steering a boat*

A STUDENT ASKED CONFUCIUS, “One time when I was crossing a river I noticed that the ferryman handled the boat with such grace that I asked him if this skill can be learned. He told me anyone can learn this skill, but if you know how to swim, then you will find it especially easy. I then asked whether a person who knows how to swim underwater but has never seen a boat before will also find it easy to learn how to handle a boat. The man did not answer that question for me. Can you tell me why?”

Confucius said, “It is easy for a swimmer to learn to steer a boat because this person already understands the nature of water. To him it is natural to move around in water. In fact, the swimmer’s movements are so natural in the water that he forgets he is in the water. The diver who has never seen a boat should also have no problem in picking up the skills of boating. To him, the deep sea is like dry land. He is so accustomed to going under water that a boat rolling over is nothing to him. He is not afraid of what may happen to the boat. He is as relaxed in a boat as he is on land. Therefore, he will learn quickly.”

When Confucius saw that his student was still puzzled, he continued, “If you play a game where scrap pieces of glass are at stake, you will play skillfully. If your expensive belt buckle is at stake, you’ll start to get clumsy. If it’s your money that’s at stake, you’ll fumble. It’s not that you’ve lost your skill. It’s because you are so flustered by things happening outside that you’ve lost your calmness inside. Lose your stillness and you will fail in everything you do.”

## *The art of swimming*

CONFUCIUS AND HIS STUDENTS were standing near a waterfall. The water flowed over a ledge and dropped over three hundred feet below, where the river continued to flow swiftly through a gorge over thirty miles long. Even the fish, turtles, and alligators would not go near these dangerous waters.

Suddenly, they saw a figure jump from the top of the waterfall into the foaming river. Confucius thought this man must be attempting suicide, so he told his students to get to the banks of the river and be ready for a rescue. But when they hurried to the edge of the river, they saw someone swimming leisurely to the bank. To their surprise, the man stood up in the shallows, shook the water off his long hair, and began to sing.

Confucius couldn't believe what he saw, so he walked toward the strange man and said, "When I saw you dive from the top of the waterfall, I thought you wanted to kill yourself. Then, when I saw you swimming in those treacherous waters and enjoying yourself, I thought you were a ghost. But coming up close, I can see that you are human. How did you manage to swim through such dangerous waters?"

The long-haired man replied, "I have no particular method of swimming, except that when I am in the water, I do not fight the water. I float with it and sink with it instead of trying to force my way through it. You can say that I started my learning with what was given to me at birth, continued with what was natural for me to do, and completed it by trusting what was meant to be."

Confucius said, "Tell me what you mean."

The man replied, "It means following the natural course of things. If I were born in the mountains, it would be natural for me to feel comfortable in the high mountains. That's starting out with what is given in birth. If I were born by the sea, it would be natural for me to grow up playing in the water. That's continuing with what is natural to do. When I do something, it never occurs to me to think about how I do it. That's trusting what is meant to be."

### *The man who could walk through fire*

A HUNTER AND A LARGE PARTY of his followers were searching in the Central Mountains for game. When they could not find any animals in the area, they set the tall grass on fire, hoping the animals would be driven out of their hiding.

Suddenly, they saw a figure emerge from the rocks. When the hunter and his friends saw the figure dancing in the fire and smoke, they thought they must have seen a ghost.

However, when the fire died down, they saw the figure again, this time walking leisurely as if nothing had happened. The hunter was curious, so he walked toward the figure to have a closer look. When he realized the figure had the shape and features of a human, he was even more fascinated. So he went up to the man and asked him, "Why do you live in the rocks and why do you run among the flames?"

The man replied, "What are rocks, what are flames? I don't know what you're talking about."

Later, when the Marquis of Wei heard about this, he asked Tzu-hsia, a student of Confucius, "Have you heard of people who can walk through fire?"

Tzu-hsia said, "My teacher Confucius once said if someone is in harmony with the elements around him, he will not be harmed by them. This person would be able to merge with the rocks and walk through fire."

"Can you do this?"

"I can't do it because I am still unable to empty my mind and throw away my knowledge. I only know enough to talk about it."

"Can your teacher do it?"

"My teacher can do it, but he doesn't want to."

When the marquis heard this, he was delighted and asked no more.

*Lieh-tzu and the sorcerer*

THERE WAS A SORCERER who could foretell the future. One look at someone's facial features and he could tell whether this person would live or die, be lucky or unlucky. He could even tell an individual's age, day of birth, and day of death.

Everybody stayed away from this sorcerer because they were afraid he might tell them things they would rather not know. Only Lieh-tzu was impressed with the sorcerer's abilities and welcomed his company.

Lieh-tzu was so taken by the sorcerer's power that he went to his teacher Hu-tzu and said, "In the past I thought you had mastered the mysteries of heaven and earth, but now I've found someone who has more power."

Hu-tzu said, "You have only scratched the surface of my teachings. I have not yet begun to show you the underlying nature of things, and you think you have understood the mysteries of the universe. If you interact with people with superficial knowledge, you will be entirely predictable. Bring this sorcerer to me and let's see what happens."

The next day Lieh-tzu brought the sorcerer to see Hu-tzu. Respectfully, Lieh-tzu waited outside. When the sorcerer came out, he said to Lieh-tzu, "I have bad news for you. Your master is about to die. At most he'll have ten days left. His face was like ash and he was as immobile as a corpse."

Distressed and weeping, Lieh-tzu went in to see his teacher and related what the sorcerer had said.

Hu-tzu said, "Just then I showed him the dominance of yin over yang. My body was rigid and my breath was dormant. Therefore, he saw me as dying. Ask him to come again."

The next day, Lieh-tzu got the sorcerer to come again to see Hu-tzu. This time, when he came out, the sorcerer said to Lieh-tzu, "Congratulations! Your master is getting better. He is lucky to have met me. I now see signs of life in him."

When Lieh-tzu related what the sorcerer had said, Hu-tzu smiled. "Just then I

showed him the dominance of yang over yin. The primordial breath had just awakened in me. I can't name it or describe it. It was rising from my heels to fill my body. Therefore, he saw me returning to life. Get him to come again."

When the sorcerer saw Hu-tzu again, he said to Lieh-tzu, "Your teacher is changing all the time. I can't read him. I'll have to come back when he's more stable."

Hu-tzu then said to Lieh-tzu, "Just then I showed him the copulation of yin and yang. He probably saw the process of creation and dissolution and the flux and change of things. Streams, rivers, waterfalls, springs, lakes, rapids, eddies, vortices are all different manifestations of water, but eventually they all flow into deep pools. There are nine pools and I have shown him three. Tell him to come again."

This time the sorcerer had scarcely walked into Hu-tzu's place when he came running out. "Stop him!" said Hu-tzu. Lieh-tzu ran after the sorcerer but was just not fast enough. He soon lost track of him.

Lieh-tzu returned to his teacher and said, "He ran so fast I couldn't catch up with him."

Hu-tzu then said, "What I just showed him was what it was like before I came into the world. I had no shape, no form, no sound, no smell. I drifted in and out of things. I could not be grasped or examined. He has never seen this kind of thing before, so he got scared and ran."

From that time on, Lieh-tzu realized that his learning was shallow and he was indeed far from understanding the way of heaven and earth. So he returned home and did not leave his house for three years. He cooked for his wife and did the housework. He took care of the pigs and was kind to everyone and everything. He distanced himself from worldly matters and freed himself from the entanglement of truths and lies. He was no longer a piece of carved jade but an unhewn block of wood. In the midst of the muddy world, he remained true to himself, and in simplicity and stillness he spent the rest of his life.

*Lieh-tzu's fear*

LIEH-TZU WAS on his way to the kingdom of Ch'i when he decided to turn back. On the road he met one of his former teachers, Po-hun, who asked him, "You were going to Ch'i; why did you turn back?"

Lieh-tzu said, "Because I'm afraid."

"What's there to be afraid of?"

"I ate at ten inns and five of them served me before they served anyone else."

"What's the problem?"

Lieh-tzu said, "It occurred to me that my ego was getting the better of me and I was commanding some sort of respect or making people think I am an important man. This made the innkeepers give me preferential treatment. If this goes on, I'll be in trouble."

Lieh-tzu continued, "Innkeepers do not make much money and certainly do not have much say in politics. If people with so little to gain make a big deal out of me, then I would really be in trouble when the generals and the chiefs of state come after me for advice. That's why I'm afraid."

Po-hun said, "Good observations! But let me tell you one thing. Even if you stay and do not go to Ch'i, other people will not let you off the hook easily."

Lieh-tzu never went to Ch'i. Instead he decided to settle down in a quiet place. Not long afterward, Po-hun came by to visit him. Seeing the shoes of many visitors at the entrance to Lieh-tzu's house, Po-hun stood outside, leaned on his staff, and then left without a word.

When Lieh-tzu was told that his former teacher was seen outside his door, he ran out barefooted and caught up with Po-hun, saying, "Master, since you have come, why don't you come in and instruct me?"

Po-hun said, "I have nothing to say. I told you before that people will not let you go easily. Now it has happened. People come to you not because you are capable of allowing them to respect you, but because you can't prevent them from doing so. You displayed your virtue and accomplishments and attracted people to come to learn from you, and neither you nor these people benefit from

this. They flatter you, and you say what they like to hear. You patronize each other and in the end no one gets enlightened.”

### *Lao-tzu teaches Yang-chu*

YANG-CHU WAS Lao-tzu's student. When he heard that Lao-tzu was journeying westward to the land of Ch'in, he caught up with his teacher on the road just outside the town of Liang.

Lao-tzu looked at Yang-chu, and then looked up at the sky and sighed, "Once I thought you were teachable, but now I know you cannot learn."

When Yang-chu heard this he was puzzled, but he said nothing. He followed Lao-tzu to the inn and attended his master. He gave his teacher a comb, a towel, and a basin of water and waited patiently while his teacher cleaned up. When he saw that Lao-tzu had finally sat down, he took off his shoes, crawled on his hands and knees to his teacher, and said respectfully, "A while ago you said I was unteachable. Seeing that you were hurrying toward town, I did not dare to delay you by asking for an explanation. Now that you seem to have some time, I would like to find out what I have done wrong."

Lao-tzu said, "You are arrogant and haughty. You have no respect for anything. No wonder no one wants your company."

Yang-chu humbly asked for instruction. Lao-tzu then said, "A person with virtue does not consider himself or herself virtuous, and someone who is enlightened does not appear perfect. Only then can you transcend the world and yet be a part of it."

Yang-chu took his teacher's advice immediately.

When he first arrived at the inn, the innkeeper would greet him respectfully every day. The innkeeper's wife was afraid that she did not serve him well. The other customers sat at a respectful distance and dared not say a word. By the time Yang-chu left the inn to continue his journey, he was joking with the innkeeper and was so friendly with the other customers that they began to fight to sit at his table.



## *What is there to appearances?*

WHILE TRAVELING to the kingdom of Sung, Yang-chu stayed at an inn. The innkeeper had two wives, one pretty and one ugly. When Yang-chu saw that the innkeeper loved the ugly woman more than the pretty one, he was surprised and asked the innkeeper, “Most people will love a pretty woman and ignore an ugly one. Why do you do the opposite?”

The innkeeper replied, “The beautiful one thinks she’s beautiful but I don’t see her beauty. The ugly one thinks she’s ugly but I don’t see her ugliness.”

Yang-chu turned to his students and said, “Remember this well. If you are true to yourself and do everything with a good conscience, everyone will see the virtue in you. Then no matter where you go, you will be respected.”

When we look at things, we often assume that when two things look alike outside, they must be similar inside. However, the sage knows that appearances cannot tell us about what’s inside. Something may look like a human and yet may not be as intelligent as a human; and something may not appear like a human and yet be as intelligent as a human.

We also tend to be attracted to things that resemble us and distance ourselves from things that don’t. When we see something that is about six feet tall, walks on two legs, has hair on its head and fingers on its hands, we call it a human and we immediately feel friendly toward it. When we see something that walks on four legs, flies, or crawls, we immediately feel this is something different from us and become wary. However, the sage knows that some animals are as intelligent and caring as humans, and some humans are as savage as animals. How can we judge by appearances?

The benefactors of humanity—the goddess Nü who created us, the sage Sheng-nung who taught us agriculture, and many of humanity’s teachers in the ancient times—do not appear in human form. Some have the body of a snake, others have the head of a bull, and yet others have wings and claws. On the other hand, the tyrants who enslaved people and killed innocents are human in appearance. Thus, how can you judge something simply by its appearance?

WHEN THE YELLOW EMPEROR defended his country from invaders, he had an army of tigers, bears, wolves, and leopards. Eagles, falcons, and hawks carried his banners. It was said that the Emperor Yao could call animals to his side with flute and chimes. Therefore, how are animals so different from us when they can respond to our call? We think we are unable to communicate with animals because they do not resemble us in appearance and they make different sounds. However, the ancient sages knew otherwise, for they could talk to animals and understand them.

Actually, animals are very similar to humans. They know how to take care of themselves, they mate, they care for their young, they avoid danger, and they seek warmth and shelter. When they travel, the strong ones protect the young. Some scout for water, some break the trail, and others watch for danger. Is this not what intelligent humans do?

In the ancient days, animals and humans lived peacefully together. Humans did not harm animals, and animals were not afraid of people. In the time of the emperors, animals began to fear people because they were hunted. Now we rarely see animals in their natural environment because they have learned to hide from us.

In a land far to the east, there are people who could still talk to domesticated animals and understand them. However, only the ancient sages knew the language of all animals and could summon them and give them instructions. In fact, these sages could speak with spirits and monsters, and thus their teachings reached all the myriad things of creation, humans and nonhumans alike.

## *Softness and hardness, yielding and resisting*

THERE ARE MANY THINGS about the way of heaven and earth that people find puzzling. For example, strength does not always win, and sometimes softness may be a more effective strategy.

If you routinely try to overcome strength with strength, then one day you will meet someone who is stronger than you are, and you will be defeated. However, if you know how to yield, then you will never be in danger. If you are competitive, there will always be that one time that you will lose. If you are noncompetitive, you will not have to worry about winning and losing.

Strength should always be complemented by softness. If you resist too much, you will break. Thus, the strong person knows when to use strength and when to yield, and good fortune and disaster depend on whether you know how and when to yield.

Lao-tzu once said, "If a branch is too rigid, it will break. Resist, and you will perish. Know how to yield, and you will survive."

THERE WAS ONCE A KING who was only interested in hiring men who were strong and brave because he believed that strength was the best way to protect himself.

One day, a wandering philosopher visited the king. The king was in a bad mood that day and was scowling and pacing around. He saw the philosopher and said, "I am only interested in hearing about strength and courage. If you are going to talk to me about virtue and morality, then you are wasting my time."

The philosopher said, "If I had a strategy that will guarantee that anyone who attempts to stab you will miss, would you be interested?"

"Of course I'd like to hear about it."

"If someone tries to stab you and misses, you will still be humiliated by the attempt on your life. Therefore, a better strategy would be one in which people will never dare to strike you in the first place."

The king reluctantly agreed.

The philosopher continued, "Now, if people do not dare to harm you, there's no

guarantee that they will not wish to harm you. Therefore, an even better strategy is one that will make people not want to harm you at all.”

The king nodded thoughtfully.

The philosopher then said, “But just because people do not want to harm you doesn’t mean they will respect you or love you. Suppose you had a strategy that could get them to love you and respect you, so that your concerns are their concerns. Would this strategy be several times better than just strength and courage?”

The king exclaimed, “This is exactly what I am looking for.”

The philosopher said, “Confucius and Mo-tzu were not princes. They never became leaders or held any political office. However, people gave them respect equal to that of kings and nobles. Everywhere they went, people craned their necks and stood on tiptoes to catch a glimpse of them. Everyone respected them and wished them well. Your Majesty, you already have political and military power. If you rule your people with virtue and integrity, wouldn’t your greatness surpass that of Confucius and Mo-tzu?”

The king was at a loss for words.

Seeing that he had accomplished his aim, the philosopher left quickly. The king turned to his ministers and said, “Here’s a man who really knows how to talk. He’s completely turned me around with his arguments.”

### *Part Three / King Mu of Ch'ou*

## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes a dream is so real that when we wake up, we feel it was not a dream. Can we tell that we are dreaming when we dream? Most often not. When we are awake, we forget our dreams. When we dream, we forget about our waking life. Which is more real, our dream life or our waking life? This is what Lieh-tzu asks us.

Even in our waking life, things are not as permanent as we think. What may seem reasonable today may appear ludicrous tomorrow. Thoughts that may have occupied our minds during the day may seem totally meaningless when we lie awake at night and think about them again.

If nothing is permanent, then why become so attached to success and failure? No one will remember what we did after we die. And even if we are remembered, what is remembered is only what others choose to remember. Why drive ourselves so hard when we can't take our riches with us when we die? Why place so much importance on love and loss of love when we know one day we must leave everyone? Life is a short journey, so why get imprisoned by social convention, peer approval, and useless worries?

While King Mu traveled in the realm of the spirit, everything felt real to him. But when he returned to his own realm, he found that everything he had experienced happened within the wink of an eye. Is the realm of the spirit real or is it just a fleeting thought?

For the man who could make it snow in summer and thunder in winter, our "real" world may be just a fleeting thought. Can this man change reality? Or is our reality not as permanent as we think it is?

If we can let go of ourselves and not be bound by worldly concerns, then we will not worry during the day and dream about our problems at night. When there is no self, there will be no dreams. Sleep is a time of rest. Why spend this time worrying?

Seeing through the illusions of self and world will allow us to understand the nature of happiness and sorrow. The rich man who was the king of his business during the day and dreamed he was a slave at night is not much different from a slave who suffered during the day and dreamed he was a king at night. They

each had half a day of happiness and half a day of misery.

If we are going to be miserable in our waking lives or in our dreams, then why not be like the man who lost his memory and forgot all his worries? Who is more fortunate, the man who loses his memory and his worries or the one who retains his memory and his worries?

The world is what we make of it. We create our happiness and our sorrows. If this is the case, why make problems for ourselves?

### *King Mu's dream*

KING MU OF CH'OU was visited by a strange man from the Far West. This man was a sorcerer who could walk through fire and water, penetrate stone and metal, fly through air, and move mountains and rivers. King Mu was very impressed with the sorcerer's abilities and treated him like a god. He built a palace for him, sent him the finest foods in his kingdom, and provided him with the most talented and beautiful courtesans.

However, the sorcerer did not think much of these gifts. He found the palace uncomfortable, the food displeasing, and the entertainers ugly, smelly, and uncultured. Seeing that his guest was dissatisfied, the king built another palace grander than the one before. He used the best wood and stone from his kingdom and employed the most skillful craftspeople to design and built it. The palace was a tower that reached up to the clouds and had a view of the most scenic mountains and valleys in the land. King Mu called it the Tower in the Middle of the Sky.

The king also gathered together the most beautiful and gentle young women in his kingdom. He provided them with the best jewelry and silks, sprinkled them with the most fragrant perfumes, and sent them to attend to the needs of the sorcerer. He called in the most talented musicians to perform the best music ever written. Every month he offered his guest expensive garments and every morning served him delicacies.

The sorcerer was still not very satisfied, but seeing that the king had done his best, he grudgingly accepted the gifts.

Not long afterward, the sorcerer invited King Mu to travel with him to his country in the West. Telling the king to close his eyes and hang on to his sleeve, he flew into the sky. When the king opened his eyes, he found himself in the sorcerer's country. Entering the palace grounds, he saw that the buildings were decorated with silver and gold. Jade, pearls, and other precious jewels adorned the walls and windows. The palace stood on a bed of clouds above the rain and storm. Everything he saw, heard, and experienced was unknown in his world. It



was then that King Mu realized the gods must have enjoyed such luxuries in their heavenly palaces. Compared to this, his own palace appeared like a mean hovel.

King Mu said to himself, "I have never seen anything like this. I wouldn't mind staying here for ten or twenty years." His musing was interrupted by the sorcerer who took him to visit yet another realm.

This time, when King Mu arrived, he could not see sun or moon, mountains or seas. Everywhere he looked, the light was so dazzling that all he could see was a kaleidoscope of colors that made him dizzy. The sounds he heard were eerie and strange and soon his senses were disoriented. His body was shaking and his mind was a blur. His insides felt queasy and he thought he was going to get sick. He quickly asked the sorcerer to get him out of there or he would go crazy. The sorcerer gave the king a gentle push, and King Mu was back at his own palace.

When he opened his eyes, the king found himself sitting on his chair as if he had never left. The wine was still unfinished in his cup, and the food was still warm. His attendants were standing in the same position as before. When he asked them what had happened, his attendants replied that he had sat in his chair and had closed his eyes briefly. King Mu was so shocked by this that it took him almost three months to recover from the whole experience.

Finally, he decided to ask the sorcerer what had really happened. His distinguished guest replied, "We traveled on a journey of the spirit. That's why your body did not move and time did not pass. You experienced a world unknown to you while you were sitting in your own palace. Is there really a difference between the places you visited and the one you call home? You were shocked and disoriented because you are comfortable with what you call permanent, and you are made nervous by things you feel are transient. Your reactions are the result of your mind playing tricks on you. Who can tell when and how fast one situation changes into another and which one is real and which one is not?"

After King Mu heard this, he decided to retire from politics. He ordered his attendants to ready his carriage and horses and went on a grand tour of his kingdom. He traveled to foreign lands where he was entertained by lords. In one of the places he visited, the tribal chief offered him the blood of snow geese as a drink and washed his feet with cow and goat milk.

Then the king climbed to the top of the Kun-lun Mountains, where he glimpsed the royal palace of the Yellow Emperor and built a memorial for future generations to remember this mighty ruler.

Next he visited the Mother Empress of the West, who gave a banquet in his honor and entertained him with dance and song. The king sang a duet with the

heavenly empress but the music only conjured feelings of sadness.

As the sun began to set in the western skies, King Mu realized he had journeyed over ten thousand miles in one day. He sighed and said, "Instead of using my time to rule the country and care for my subjects, I have spent this day singing and enjoying myself. I will probably be seen as a fool by future generations!"

King Mu was not divine. He enjoyed his life fully and died when his time was up. But everybody believed he became a god and went up to heaven.

### *Learning the arcane arts*

LAO-CH'ENG-TZU went to learn the secrets of the arcane arts from the sage Wen-tzu. When his teacher had not told him anything after three years, he apologized for his stupidity and asked for permission to return home.

Wen-tzu bowed to Lao-ch'eng-tzu, led him into his room, dismissed the other students, and closed the door. Then he said:

“When my teacher Lao-tzu left for the western lands, he told me that the life and breath of heaven and earth and the shape of all things are really illusions. When yin and yang energies copulate and things come into existence, we call it birth. When they separate and disappear, we call it death. That which happens according to the mathematics of change we call transformation, or the arcane.

“The principles of creation and dissolution are profound and not easily understood. If we simply latch on to the superficial aspects of change, we will only be playing with illusions, and whatever we manipulate will not have lasting effects. Only when you penetrate the mathematics of transformation and become one with change will you be qualified to learn the arcane arts. After all, you and I are illusions of body and mind, so what is so magical about the arcane?”

Lao-ch'eng-tzu thanked his teacher and returned home. For three months he thought about what Wen-tzu had said and began to let go of the illusion of body and mind. Having done that, he was able to appear and disappear at will and turn the seasons around. He could call down thunder in winter and snow in summer. He could make running animals fly and flying animals run. However, he did not reveal his abilities to anyone, so these arts were never handed down to future generations.

Lieh-tzu said, ‘Those who are adept at the arcane arts do not reveal them casually. In fact, they hide it so well that what they do appears ordinary. It is generally accepted that the ancient sages and kings accomplished what they did with virtue and courage. But who can say they did not use the arts of the arcane?’

## *Dreams*

IT IS SAID that episodes in our waking life can be classified into eight categories, and experiences in our dream life can be divided into six. Our life on earth revolves around these fourteen kinds of events.

The eight episodes of our waking life are: events, actions, gain, loss, happiness, sorrow, life, and death. These are experienced when our bodies encounter something in the world.

The six experiences of our dream life are: normal dreams with nothing significant, dreams of warning, dreams that result from excessive thinking, instructive dreams, happy dreams, and fearful dreams or nightmares. These dream states are experienced when our minds are restless.

If we do not recognize when changes come and why they occur, we will be confused. However, if we know the cause and effect of things, then we are prepared and will not be excited or afraid. This is the same with dreams.

The rise and fall of energy in our bodies follows the flow of energy in heaven and earth. When there is too much yin energy, then we will dream about deep waters and experience the fear of drowning. When there is too much yang energy, we will dream about hot fires and experience the threat of being burned. When both yin and yang energies are powerful, then we will dream of violence and killing. When we are hungry, we will dream about begging for food. When filled, we will dream about offering food to others. For the same reason, those who are ill with a burning fever will dream that their bodies are light and floating. Those who are ill with a shivering cold will dream they are sinking and drowning. Sleep with your belt around you, and you will dream you are suffocated by a snake. Sleep when darkness begins to fall, and you will dream of firelight. If your stomach is upset when you sleep, you will dream of eating. People who go to sleep depressed will dream of drinking wine. Those who go to sleep after crying in sorrow will dream of dancing and singing.

Lieh-tzu said:

“When the mind is restless, we will dream. What aroused the body during the

day will appear in our dreams at night. This is a way in which mind and body respond to each other. Thus, people whose minds are empty of thoughts and whose bodies are not aroused by things around them will not be bothered by dreams at night. These people are fully awake in their waking life and fully restful in their sleep. The ancient sages are not attached to their thoughts and actions during the day, so they do not dream at night.”

There is a land far away that does not receive the breath of yin and yang. Therefore, in this place there are no changes in the seasons and no difference in night or day. The people there do not work or eat or wear clothes. They sleep most of the time and only wake up once every fifty days. In the brief time they are awake, they feel they are dreaming. On the other hand, dreams are very real to them.

There is another country that is in the middle of the world. The land stretches north and south of a great river; it is bounded by mountains to the east and west; and it extends over ten thousand miles. Because it is in the middle of the world, it receives the breath of yin and yang equally. Therefore, there are differences in the seasons and a clear distinction between day and night. Some people in this country are intelligent and some are dull. Some are talented and some are ordinary. The people in this country have an organized society, know how to cultivate the land, and are ruled by a leader. They are also skilled in a variety of activities. The people here believe that what they experience in waking life is real and what they experience in dreams is unreal.

There is yet another country where it is always hot. The sun and moon never set, and there is no night. Battered by the heat, the land does not support crops. The people feed on wild fruits and tree roots and do not know how to cook with fire. They are fierce and violent. The strong ones conquer the weak. They value force over virtue. Because there is no night, they are active all the time and sleep very rarely.

Are events in our waking life more real than dreams? To people who sleep all the time, dreams are more real than waking life. However, to those who divide their time equally between waking and sleeping, experiences in their waking life are real, and events in dreams are unreal. And yet, to those who do not know what it means to sleep, it does not make sense to talk about a difference between waking and dreaming. What then is the difference between waking and dreaming?

### *The truth about happiness and misery*

A CERTAIN RICH MAN in the country of Ch'ou had a way with managing his business. Under his supervision, his estates and investments yielded huge returns. However, he drove his workers mercilessly and made them labor from sunrise to sunset.

There was an old servant who had worked all his life on the estate. Weakened by hard labor and rough treatment, he had lost both strength and stamina and was no longer able to produce. But the businessman had no compassion for the poor servant. Instead, he punished him for being lazy and drove him to work harder and longer.

The servant was so miserable that he groaned all day while he worked. Tired in body and mind, he fell into a deep sleep at night. As he lost consciousness, he began to dream. He dreamed he was king of a prosperous land and had thousands of servants at his command. He lived in a beautiful palace, toured his kingdom in pomp and luxury, and was happy beyond imagination. But when he woke up the next morning, it was another day of misery.

When his fellow workers comforted him, the old servant said, "It is really not that bad. I suffer during the day, but at night I enjoy myself when I am the king of a country."

Meanwhile, the rich businessman found that he was extremely tired after managing his estates each day. He too fell into a deep sleep and dreamed. But when he dreamed, his dream was a nightmare. He became a slave bonded to a cruel master. He was given the meanest tasks and was forced to work long, hard hours. Even when he was tired he was driven mercilessly. He was beaten and punished for every possible fault whether it was his or not. He suffered miserably in his dream and only got relief at daybreak.

Every day the two men played out the roles of master and servant. Every night they dreamed and played out the roles of slave and king. The days and months went by. The rich man was miserable and asked a friend for help.

The friend said to him, "You have a huge fortune and a respected name in the

business world. Your social standing is far above the ordinary person's. Therefore, dreaming that you are at the bottom of the social ladder is quite normal. Things have a way of balancing themselves out. If you want to have everything go your way in both your waking and dreaming life, that's impossible."

The businessman thought about his friend's words and realized that he was pushing things to the extreme. He had made himself too fortunate and his workers too miserable. From then on, he treated his workers with compassion, lessened their workloads, and did not drive himself as hard. As a result, everybody felt better. The rich man did not have nightmares of being a slave at night, and the old servant did not have to suffer through the day.

### *What is real and what is unreal?*

A MAN WHO WAS GATHERING firewood in the wilderness came across a deer. He killed it and hid it in a hollow so he could return and retrieve it later. He was so happy about his tremendous luck that he soon forgot where he hid the deer and began to suspect he might have dreamed the whole thing.

As he walked home, he muttered to himself about his strange dream. A passerby happened to overhear the woodcutter talking to himself and decided to see if he could find the deer the man had mentioned.

After searching around carefully in the area where the woodcutter had described, he found the deer in a hollow covered by branches. Amazed at his good fortune, the man took the deer home and said to his wife, "Today I met a man who dreamed he had killed a deer but had forgotten where he hid it. I went and looked around the place where he said he had killed the animal and found it in a hollow. Isn't it incredible that dreams can be real?"

His wife replied, "I think you probably dreamed the whole incident. You found a deer and you dreamed you met a woodcutter who talked about killing one." Her husband then said, "Well, it doesn't really matter whether I dreamed up the incident or not. I found a deer and now we have a good supply of food."

When the woodcutter got home he was still bothered about whether he had killed a deer or not. That night he had a dream. He dreamed he had indeed killed a deer and had placed it in a hollow and covered it with branches. Moreover, in his dream he saw that someone whom he had met on the way home had gone to the hiding place and taken away his deer.

The next morning he went straight to the house he saw in his dream and found the deer in the yard. He went in to claim his deer, but the other man would not give it up. Finally, the two went to the local magistrate to settle the matter.

The magistrate listened to both men's claims and then said, "One of you killed the deer and then said it was a dream. Later you claimed it was real and not a dream. Now the other one of you found a deer that someone dreamed he killed, but you tell me your wife said that you dreamed up the whole thing and that the



woodcutter and his dream never existed. Well, all I see here are a deer and two people contesting their claims. I judge that the deer be divided up equally between the two of you.”

When the king heard about this strange incident, he asked his minister, “Do you suppose the magistrate will dream about dividing the deer?”

His minister replied, “I cannot tell whether something was real or dreamed. Only sages like the Yellow Emperor or Confucius can tell the difference between waking and dreaming. Since they have both left this world, we will have no way of telling what was dreamed and what was not. So, in the meantime, I would go along with the magistrate’s decision of dividing the deer in half.”

### *The man who lost his memory*

A MAN CALLED HUA-TZU suddenly lost his memory in middle age. If you gave him something in the morning, he would forget about it by evening. If you asked him about something in the evening, he would forget it the next day. In the street he would forget to walk. At home he would forget to sit. Today he would forget what happened yesterday, and tomorrow he would not remember what happened the day before.

Concerned about his loss of memory, his family first invited a fortune-teller and then a sorcerer to see if they could help Hua-tzu restore his memory. When neither could help, a doctor was called, but the healer shook his head and said there was nothing he could do either.

Finally, Hua-tzu thought about a philosopher who probably could help him. So desperate was Hua-tzu's wife in finding him a cure that she sold half their possessions and took her husband to the philosopher to ask for help.

The family traveled to the philosopher's home and begged the wise man to cure Hua-tzu. The philosopher told the family, "This kind of illness cannot be cured by omens, magic, or herbs. I'll have to use special methods that are designed to work on his mind."

The philosopher then tried an experiment on Hua-tzu. When he told Hua-tzu to take off his clothes, Hua-tzu wanted to be dressed. When he starved the man, Hua-tzu asked for food. When he locked Hua-tzu in a dark room, the man wanted to get out. Seeing Hua-tzu's reactions, the scholar was delighted and told Hua-tzu's wife, "Your husband can be cured. However, I will need to use a secret method that was handed down to me through the generations. Therefore, I cannot allow you to stay here and watch. Come back in seven days. You have my guarantee that he will be cured."

Hua-tzu's family had no choice but to leave. For seven days the philosopher was secluded with Hua-tzu. No one knew what he did or how he did it, but when Hua-tzu's family arrived to take him home, they found him completely cured.

After Hua-tzu recovered his memory, he became irritable and angry. He

chased out his wife, beat up his sons, and threatened the philosopher with a spear. When the police arrested him for disrupting the peace and questioned his motives, Hua-tzu said, "When I lost my memory, I was carefree and happy. I slept peacefully and had no worries when I woke up. I didn't have anything on my mind, and I was a free man. Now that I've got my memory back I am miserable. I look back on the fortunes and misfortunes, the gains and losses, and the joys and sorrows in my life, and I am overwhelmed. I woke up from a good dream into a nightmare. I will never be able to go back to the happy times when my memory was lost!"

When Tzu-kung, a student of Confucius, heard about Hua-tzu's outburst, he was puzzled. He went to ask his teacher for an explanation, but Confucius only said, "This is something you will never understand." He then turned to his most promising student, Yen-hui, and told him to take note of all this.

## *Who is confused?*

THERE WAS A MAN who had a very precocious son, but when the boy grew up, he seemed to have a strange kind of mental illness. When he heard laughter, he thought it was weeping. When he smelled fragrances, he thought they were pungent. When he saw black, he said it was white. When he ate something bitter, he said it was sweet. When he did something wrong, he thought it was correct. It appeared that he was utterly confused and did everything contrary to what was expected.

His father was worried about his son's problem and asked his friends for help. One man advised the father, "There is a wise gentleman in the land of Lu who probably could help your son. Why not give it a try?"

The father gathered whatever money he had and, taking his son with him, made the long journey to the kingdom of Lu.

On the road he met Lao-tzu and described his son's problem to the Taoist sage.

Lao-tzu said to the father, "How do you know that your son is mentally disturbed and confused? These days there are many people who are confused about right and wrong, true and false. There are even more people who are mentally disturbed by gain and loss. So your son is not the only person who has this problem. Anyhow, just because one person is confused doesn't mean the whole family is confused. If one family is confused, it should not affect the whole village. If an entire village is confused, it should not affect the whole country. If one country is confused, it does not mean the whole world will be turned upside down. If the whole world is confused, then who is there to tell anyone they are confused?"

"Suppose everyone is like your son and you are the only one who's different. Who is confused, then: you, or your son and the rest of the world? Who in the world can claim to be absolutely clear about right and wrong, black and white, true and false, and happiness and sorrow? I'm not even sure whether I am confused or not when I tell you these things. And those wise gentlemen of Lu are

even more confused. So how can they clear up somebody else's confusion? I think you should save your money and take your son home.”

### *The man who got upset over nothing*

THERE WAS A MAN who was born in the country of Yen but grew up far away in the land of Ch'u. In his old age he had a longing for his homeland and decided to return there to live.

As he journeyed toward his country of birth, he passed through the country of Chin. His companions on the road decided to play a trick on him. So one of them said, "This is your hometown." The man became silent and thoughtful.

Another friend pointed to a building and said, "Look, over there is your neighborhood temple." The man sighed deeply.

One companion led him to an abandoned house and said, "Here's the home of your ancestors." The poor man broke down in tears.

Another companion motioned him toward a group of tombstones and said, "Your ancestors are buried here." The man began to weep loudly and bitterly.

Seeing his distress, the friends decided the joke was over, so they told him they were just playing a trick on him.

The homesick man was very embarrassed about his emotional outbursts and kept quiet for the rest of the way.

When he finally reached his hometown and saw his ancestral house and the family tombs, he did not feel as bad.

Can we say the man got upset over nothing when his friends teased him? We cannot say his emotions were false, because he truly believed what his friends told him. Our emotions are the result of our beliefs. They have nothing to do with what is really out there. If we believe one thing, then certain emotions will follow. If we believe some other thing, we will experience different emotions. Understanding this, the homesick man realized his emotions depended on what he believed he saw, not what was "really" there. So, when he finally reached his homeland, he was less attached to his longing, and as a result his feelings were less stirred by his surroundings.

## *Part Four / Confucius*

## INTRODUCTION

Who is a sage? What is an enlightened person? Are they people who are known and respected by many? Or are they the ones who hide their knowledge and wisdom and appear like ordinary persons?

Lieh-tzu thinks that enlightened people are those who speak rarely and do not reveal their abilities and accomplishments casually. In fact, they may appear slow and dull. They see with their ears and hear with their eyes. They may hide behind a wooden expression, or they may perceive and act in ways contrary to what people expect. Thus, to most people they appear crazy and inconsistent, but often they are not even noticed at all.

Most people would question why these enlightened people do not want to make themselves known. After all, they possess skills beyond our imagination and certainly can make an impact on the society and the world. But in a world of truth and lies, where people are trapped by fame, fortune, approval, and greed, the sages who hide their skill are the ones who survive.



### *True happiness and contentment*

CONFUCIUS HAD JUST RETIRED from politics when Tzu-kung came visiting. As Tzu-kung entered, he saw his teacher looking sad and despondent. He had never seen Confucius behave like this before, so he left quietly and went to talk to his friend Yen-hui.

Yen-hui was one of the most promising students of Confucius. He enjoyed a special relationship with his teacher and understood the teachings of his master more than any other student. When Yen-hui heard what Tzu-kung had said about their teacher, he did not say a word. Instead, he picked up his lute and started to play and sing as he walked to his teacher's home.

When Confucius heard Yen-hui's singing, he was surprised. He stopped frowning and invited Yen-hui inside. Yen-hui was happy that his little act succeeded in cheering up his teacher, but Confucius greeted him with, "Why are you so happy with yourself these days?"

Yen-hui did not respond directly to his teacher's question. Instead, he asked Confucius, "Teacher, why are you so depressed these days?"

Confucius said, "Let's hear your reasons for being happy first."

So Yen-hui replied, "You have taught me that to accept life and be contented with the will of heaven is to be happy. I have kept those words in my mind and now I am always satisfied and happy."

Confucius was taken aback by Yen-hui's answer. "Did I really teach you that? I think you misunderstood me. Besides, that was a long time ago. Things are different now, and my understanding of happiness has changed."

Confucius then looked at Yen-hui intently and continued, "You only know that accepting life and being contented with the will of heaven is happiness. You do not know that sometimes it may bring sorrow. You think you are contented and happy if you are not attracted by fame and fortune, or worried about life and death, or disturbed by changes in your surroundings. My understanding of what it means to be happy and contented is not merely that. Let me tell you some of my experiences and maybe you will understand what it means to be truly happy

and contented.

“When I was young, I pledged that one day I should offer my services to my country and help to make a better society. So I studied the classics, acquired skills in the martial arts, and cultivated myself with music and poetry. I had hoped I could lead others with my example, become an advisor to the lord of my country, and help people live a better life. But when I completed my studies, the situation changed. My country became weak and the court became corrupt. Politicians fought for power, and intrigues and betrayals became the norm.

“Nowadays, no one is interested in hearing about virtue and harmony anymore. In our society, people place more importance on business advantage than friendship. Relationships have become shallow, and everyone is bending to social and peer pressure to get approval or to get ahead.

“How naive I was in thinking I could turn things around! Now I know no one can change the government or society by studying the classics. But I have not found a way to solve the problems of the world, either. When you lose your ideals and vision, you will realize that simply accepting life does not necessarily make you happy.”

Yen-hui was dumbfounded by Confucius’s confession. He had never heard his teacher talk about his life and his experiences. So he continued to listen attentively.

Confucius said, “To be truly happy and contented, you must let go of the idea of what it means to be happy or content. When you understand there is really nothing to be happy or sad about, then you will be truly contented. When you have reached this state of mind, then you will realize it does not matter whether or not music, poetry, or the classics are useful in changing society. In fact, whether or not you have an impact on society is not important.”

Yen-hui finally understood what his teacher meant. He bowed respectfully and left.

Seeing that Yen-hui had returned home, Tzu-kung went to see his friend. When Yen-hui related what Confucius had told him, Tzu-kung was confused. He thought about his teacher’s words and found that he was far from the state of mind Confucius had attained. Feeling frustrated and hopeless, he went home and locked himself in his house. For seven days he could not sleep. He lost his appetite and became thin and sallow.

When Yen-hui saw Tzu-kung’s condition, he patiently explained his master’s teachings to Tzu-kung and encouraged him to have confidence in himself. With Yen-hui’s help, Tzu-kung finally came around. From then on, Tzu-kung was not depressed anymore. Daily he went to study with Confucius and laughed and sang with the other students.

*Seeing with ears and hearing with eyes*

THERE WAS A DIPLOMAT from the country of Ch'en who visited an acquaintance when he was on official business in the kingdom of Lu. When the two men had exchanged greetings, the acquaintance Shu-sun said, "We have a famous sage in our country."

The man of Ch'en said, "I take it you are referring to this man named Confucius?"

"That's right."

"How do you know he is a sage?" the man of Ch'en challenged.

"I have heard his student Yen-hui say that his teacher can empty his mind and make his body intelligent."

"We have a sage in our country, too. Have you heard of him?"

"Who is it?"

"He's a student of Lao-tzu and his name is Kang-sen-tzu. He has not only mastered all the teachings of Lao-tzu but has surpassed his teacher in many ways. He can see with his ears and hear with his eyes."

Shu-sun was stumped. He had never heard of someone with these abilities. He told his friends about Kang-sen-tzu, and soon everybody in the country of Lu talked about the sage who could hear with his eyes and see with his ears.

The talk reached the Marquis of Lu, who was so astounded by this man's extraordinary abilities that he sent a personal invitation to ask Kang-sen-tzu to be his guest.

When Kang-sen-tzu arrived, the marquis humbly asked, "I have heard that you can hear with your eyes and see with your ears. Is this true?"

Kang-sen-tzu replied amicably, "That's all rumor. It's not true that I can make my ears see and my eyes hear. But I can see and hear without using my eyes or ears."

The marquis was even more impressed. "This is more than what I expected. Can you tell me how you do it?"

Kang-sen-tzu then said, "It is really quite simple. My body is in harmony with

my mind, and my mind is in harmony with my energies. My energies follow my spirit, and my spirit is in tune with everything around it. Therefore, I can hear the faintest sound and see the slightest movement. Nothing escapes my awareness, whether it is far away or right in front of me. I do not know whether I perceive it with my senses, experience it with my body, or know it in my guts. Let's say it is just a natural feel for the way of things."

The Marquis of Lu was very delighted with Kang-sen-tzu's answer and went to tell Confucius about it. Confucius simply smiled and said nothing.

## *Who is a sage?*

A MINISTER OF THE KINGDOM of Shang came to visit Confucius. Never one to beat around the bush, the minister always asked questions in a blunt and straightforward way. So the moment he saw Confucius he asked, “Are you a sage?”

Confucius replied, “I do not dare to claim to be one. I’m only someone who has studied much and read widely.”

“Then were the Three Kings sages?”

“The Three Kings knew how to use their courage and intelligence. Whether they were sages I would not know.”

“What about the Five Emperors?”

“The Five Emperors knew how to rule with virtue. Were they sages? I do not know.”

“How about the Three Lords? Were they sages?”

“The Three Lords knew how to use the right people at the right time. It’s not for me to say whether they were sages or not.”

The minister was beginning to get impatient. “Then who do you think is a sage?”

Confucius would not be hurried, so he waited until the minister calmed down again and replied, “Maybe far away in the West is a person who doesn’t talk about the art of government and yet his country is orderly and peaceful. He rarely speaks about promises but he is trusted by all. He does not use force, so everything runs smoothly. His heart is open and his actions are spontaneous. His subjects don’t even know what to call him. I suspect he is a sage, but that he is truly a sage I would not know.”

When the minister of Shang heard this, he was not pleased. He went away thinking to himself, “It doesn’t make sense. This fellow Confucius must be fooling me.”

Does it really matter if someone is recognized as a sage or not? If you are truly honest, sincere, and upright in everything you do, do you need others to

acknowledge your virtues to make you virtuous?

## *What is wisdom?*

ONE DAY TZU-HSIA was chatting with Confucius. When they came to discussing the merits of each student, Tzu-hsia asked his teacher, “What do you think of Yen-hui?”

Confucius replied, “Yen-hui is very kind and gentle. His compassion far surpasses mine.”

“How about Tzu-kung?”

“Tzu-kung is much better than I am when it comes to debating and presenting arguments.”

“And what about Tzu-lu?”

“Tzu-lu is a brave man. I cannot match him for courage.”

“And Tzu-chang?”

“Tzu-chang can hold his dignity better than I.”

Tzu-hsia was so surprised by his teacher’s answers that he stood up and exclaimed, “How come they all want to learn from you?”

Confucius motioned his student to sit down. When he saw that Tzu-hsia had calmed down, he said, “Yen-hui is compassionate, but he is stubborn and inflexible. Tzu-kung can be very persuasive, but he does not know when to stop talking. Tzu-lu can be courageous but does not know tolerance. Tzu-chang can be dignified but does not know how to be harmonious with others. I would not exchange their merits for my own even if they offered. That’s why they all come to learn from me.”

Wisdom is not competence in one skill or many skills. It is the ability to recognize strengths and weaknesses in ourselves and others. Thus, a wise teacher knows that although he may not surpass certain students in specific skills, he can give them what they need to become better individuals.

### *The man with a wooden face*

AFTER LIEH-TZU had completed his studies with the immortal Old Shang and his friend the sage Po-hun, he settled in the southern part of town. Not long afterward, he was besieged by visitors and hopeful students. Sometimes Lieh-tzu's house was crowded with hundreds of people.

Lieh-tzu welcomed their company and enjoyed talking with them all day. Next door to Lieh-tzu lived a man by the name of Nan-kuo-tzu. In the twenty years that they were neighbors, Lieh-tzu and this man had never greeted each other. If they passed each other on the road, Nankuo-tzu would walk by as if Lieh-tzu were not there. Lieh-tzu's friends figured the two men must be enemies.

When someone asked Lieh-tzu about his neighbor, Lieh-tzu said, "Nan-kuo-tzu's face is full but his mind is empty. He hears nothing, so he is not distracted by what's happening around him. He sees nothing, so he is not attracted to things around him. He says nothing, so he never argues with others. His mind is still, so nothing bothers him. His body is not aroused, so he is like a blank wall. Somebody like him would not want to be bothered by anyone or anything, so there's no point in trying to reach him."

Nonetheless, Lieh-tzu decided to visit his neighbor. A large group of friends and students followed as Lieh-tzu went into Nan-kuo-tzu's house. Entering, they saw Nan-kuo-tzu sitting there like a clay figure. His face was as expressionless as a block of wood. His eyes were blank and his body was motionless. Indeed, he was not someone they could talk to. Even Lieh-tzu had no way of getting through to Nan-kuo-tzu.

While everyone was standing there not knowing what to do, suddenly Nan-kuo-tzu looked at the students who were standing at the back and said, "You are all arrogant and competitive." The crowd was startled. When they all returned to Lieh-tzu's house, they asked, "What went on?"

Lieh-tzu replied, "If you can see intention, then you need not use speech to communicate. The sage does not need to talk to people to understand their intent. Moreover, they do not need to use words to communicate their own intent. This



is called saying nothing. The enlightened person can also sense the truth without going through deduction or reasoning. This is called knowing nothing and yet knowing all. Nan-kuo-tzu appears as if he does not see, does not hear, and does not know. However, he sees all, hears all, and knows all. For him, there is no separation between seeing and not seeing, hearing and not hearing, acting and not acting, and knowing and not knowing.”

True communication does not always require speech or action. Enlightened persons communicate through the spirit and do not need to convey their intentions through sound and movement. Consequently, the way they communicate is more effective than that of the ordinary person.

### *The art of traveling and sightseeing*

LIEH-TZU USED TO love to travel and see the sights. When his teacher Hu-tzu asked him what he found so enjoyable about traveling, Lieh-tzu said, “While other people travel to see the beauty of sights and surroundings, I enjoy seeing the way things change. To other sightseers, it may seem that I am like them, but the difference between us is that they see things whereas I see changes.”

Hu-tzu said, “You think you are different from other travelers, but actually you are not. Although they are amused by sights and sounds, and you are fascinated by things that always change, you are both occupied with what is out there rather than what you experience inside. People who are attracted to the external world are always looking for something new and wonderful that will satisfy their senses. However, only people who look into themselves will find true satisfaction.”

After this conversation, Lieh-tzu stopped traveling because he thought he had thoroughly misunderstood what it means to travel. Seeing this, Hu-tzu said to him, “Travel is such a wonderful experience! Especially when you forget you are traveling. Then you will enjoy whatever you see and do. Those who look into themselves when they travel will not think about what they see. In fact, there is no distinction between the viewer and the seen. You experience everything with the totality of yourself, so that every blade of grass, every mountain, every lake is alive and is a part of you. When there is no division between you and what is other, this is the ultimate experience of traveling.”

### *Lung-shu's strange illness*

ONE DAY LUNG-SHU was chatting with his friend who claimed he was especially adept at curing strange illnesses. Lung-shu found this hard to believe, so he challenged his friend, "I have a strange illness. If you can cure me, then I'll agree that you're the best doctor around."

His friend did not seem flustered. "Tell me about your illness," he said.

"Now listen carefully," said Lung-shu. "This is my illness. When I am praised by others, I do not feel pride. When others speak badly about me, I do not feel disgraced. When I gain something, I am not happy. When I lose, I am not sad. Life and death, riches and poverty, fortune and misfortune are the same to me. As a matter of fact, I can see people as pigs and see myself as other people. When I'm at home, I feel I am wandering around. When I'm in my country, I feel like I am among foreigners. Since I got this strange illness, I have lost all interest in becoming rich and famous. I don't care about titles, land, and renown. I don't think much about rules and regulations. The rise and fall of government and politicians are not my concern, and I am not affected by the emotions of people around me. Because of my illness I can no longer serve my country, manage my business, or become the head of my family. How are you able to help me?"

The doctor told Lung-shu to stand with his back to the sun. Facing the light, he examined Lung-shu from a distance and looked him up and down carefully. Presently he said, "Ah, I can see that your heart is empty and you are close to being a sage. Six out of seven cavities in your heart are completely open. However, one of them is still shut. This blockage is probably the cause of your illness. If indeed your illness is seeing wisdom as a strange disease, then my skills are inadequate to cure you."

Lung-shu had gotten rid of all his attachments except one. He still retained a conception of what it means to be enlightened. Comparing enlightenment to a strange illness, Lung-shu made it mysterious, extraordinary, and unnatural.

Enlightenment is a very normal experience, attainable by everyone. Therefore,

there is nothing mysterious or secretive about it. There is nothing unnatural about it, either, because it follows the natural way of things.

*Responding naturally*

WHEN ONE OF Yang-chu's friends died, Yang-chu went to the funeral laughing and singing and showed no signs of mourning. When another of his friends died, Yang-shu hugged the dead man and wept bitterly.

Ordinarily, people are happy about birth and sad about death. Why did Yang-chu laugh at the death of one person and cry at the death of another? Yang-chu found nothing sad about the man who died after living his life to the fullest. In fact, he felt happy for the friend who left this world as a contented man. However, Yang-chu was sad about his other friend's death because he felt this man died before his time. In both cases Yang-chu was simply responding naturally to the circumstances.

*There are some things you just can't fight*

AN EYE that is about to lose its sight tends to be extremely sharp in making out details. An ear that is about to become deaf tends to be very acute in its hearing. A tongue that is about to lose its sensitivity can make out the differences between water from two sources. A nose that is about to lose its ability is most sensitive to fragrances. It is as if the senses are fighting to maintain their usefulness. However, no matter how hard they fight, they will eventually lose their effectiveness.

It is the same with people. People who are beginning to weaken will push their bodies to the limit. People who are about to lose their minds will become unusually argumentative. This is because they are not willing to admit that all things must end, and they want to make a show of their strength to cover their weakness.

On the other hand, enlightened persons accept the natural course of things. They do not force their bodies to display strength or their minds to show cleverness. Knowing that there are some things that they can't fight, they accept what comes. That is why they can embrace life and accept death.

*Who is supporting whom?*

IN THE PART OF TOWN where Lieh-tzu lived and taught, there were many philosophers of high virtue. In another part of town, the eastern quarter, there lived many skilled civil servants and politicians.

One day when Pai-feng, a student of Lieh-tzu, was walking through the eastern quarter, he ran into Teng-hsi, a legislator and a respected official. Teng-hsi and his students were always talking about how to solve the political problems of the day. The philosophers, on the other hand, seldom discussed politics. When Teng-hsi saw Pai-feng, he turned to his students and said, "Watch me make that fellow dance around in circles." His students encouraged him on.

Teng-hsi approached Pai-feng and said, "Do you know the difference between supporting yourself and being supported by others? I bet you don't. Let me tell you. People who are always supported by others and never make an effort to support themselves are no better than dogs or pigs. In this world, only those who contribute can hope to receive benefits from society. Those who sit around and wait for the kitchen to hand out food are just like domestic animals and livestock,"

Pai-feng did not answer, but one of his followers stepped forward and said to Teng-hsi, "Your honor, have you heard that in the countries of Ch'i and Lu there are many people with special skills? Some are experts in carpentry and ceramics. Some are excellent metal workers. Some are talented musicians and artists. Some are good at military strategy and some are great fighters. Some are knowledgeable in religious ceremonies and rituals, and others are skillful in divination and magic. Despite their expertise in their own areas, none of these people are good administrators. They can do their own tasks but cannot tell others to do theirs. Fortunately, there are some people with no special skills at all who could be employed as bureaucrats. So we have the following situation. Those who are skilled are employed by those who are not skilled, and you administrators and bureaucrats are employed by citizens like us. Now, who is supporting whom?"

Teng-hsi did not know what to say. Sheepishly, he turned toward his students and walked away.



### *What is strength?*

THE EARL OF THE STATE of Kung-yi was reputed to be a very strong man. A certain duke was impressed with this man's strength and spoke highly of him before the king. The king was eager to meet the earl, so he sent a large gift and invited the earl to give a demonstration of his strength at the court.

When the Earl of Kung-yi arrived, the king was shocked. The man who stood before him was not a heavy, muscular man but a thin and lanky fellow. The king was beginning to have doubts about this man's ability, so he frowned and said, "Really, how strong are you?"

The earl replied, "I am strong enough to break the legs of a grasshopper and snap the wings of an insect."

When the king heard this, he was annoyed no end. Either this man was a fraud or he was trying to pass off a witty remark. Irritated, the king said loudly, "The strong men in my service can rip the hide of a rhinoceros and drag nine oxen around by their tails, and yet I am not satisfied with their strength. How come you are so famous for your strength when you can only break the wings and legs of insects?"

The Earl of Kung-yi sighed and said, "My lord, this is an excellent question. Let me explain. My teacher Old Shang was the strongest man in the world, yet his family knew nothing about it. He never showed his strength because he never had to use it. When I saw this, I swore I would spend the rest of my life learning from him.

"This is what he told me:

'Most people like to see what they have never seen before or do what has never been done before. They want to start tackling challenging conditions right away and do not have the patience to learn from scratch. However, I say if you want to train your powers of seeing, you should start out by scrutinizing a stack of firewood. If you want to sharpen your sense of hearing, you should start out by listening to the sound of bells. In this way, you will build your abilities gradually and not encounter a lot of obstacles while you learn. Once you have

acquired the abilities, no condition will appear difficult. And if the conditions are not difficult, why would you need to call on your abilities to deal with them?”

The earl continued, “If my reputation for strength is known around the country, then I have not followed my master’s teachings well. However, I am not famous for my strength because I boast about what I can do, but because of the way I use it.”

The king was finally satisfied with the earl’s explanation.

In strength, the Earl of Kung-yi had not reached the level of mastery that his teacher Old Shang had. While the earl did not boast about his ability, he still needed to use it. Old Shang, however, had reached the point where there was nothing out there that proved difficult enough for him to need to call on his strength. So he never needed to use it.

### *The strange arguments of Kungsun Lung*

PRINCE MOU was one of the most intelligent sons in the royal family of Wei. He was always in the company of philosophers and scholars, listening to their lectures and debates. Not interested in politics and government, Prince Mou spent much of his time with the sophist Kungsun Lung and enjoyed hearing what this witty philosopher had to say about everything in the world.

A prominent scholar made fun of Prince Mou's friendship with Kungsun Lung. When the prince heard about it, he asked the scholar, "What's so funny about my being friends with Kungsun Lung?"

The scholar said, "Everybody knows that Kungsun Lung is strange. He has no respect for anyone or anything. He has a sharp tongue and does not know when to hold it. His views are eccentric and extreme and he does not follow any known school of teaching. He likes to use his wit and verbal finesse to confuse others and win arguments. Although he can argue successfully that white is black and straight is crooked, you walk away with the feeling that he's won the argument not because he is correct but because you can't outwit him. I find him to be a most shallow and conceited man. I laugh at you because you are a fool to treat him with such respect."

Prince Mou was not happy with this evaluation of his friend.

"Why do you see Kungsun Lung this way? Can you show me instances where he is as you said?"

"Sure! First, look at what Kungsun Lung said to the grandson of Confucius. He said: 'There is an archer who can fire arrows in such a way that the tip of the second arrow touches the notch of the first one, and the tip of the third arrow touches the notch of second. Thus, when the point of the first arrow is lodged in the target, the third arrow is still notched in the bowstring. As a result, instead of three arrows there is only one long arrow, of which the tip is in the target and the notch is still in the bowstring.' When the Confucianist was awestruck by this feat of archery, Kungsun Lung then said, 'This is nothing. Have you heard of the student of the great archer P'eng who was angry with his wife and decided to

teach her a lesson by frightening her? He took a famous bow, fitted it with the best-crafted arrow, and shot at her eye. Strange it may sound, but when the arrow touched the surface of the eye, it fell to the ground. The whole thing happened so fast that his wife did not even have time to blink. Now that's what I call mastery in archery.' Wouldn't you say this is ridiculous?"

Prince Mou calmly replied, "The words of a wise man are not easily understood by a fool. The three arrows can line up one behind another making a long arrow because the archer knows the precise moment to let go of each arrow. Moreover, an archer can make an arrow stop right in front of someone's eye if he knows how to deploy his strength in such a way that the arrow loses its momentum when it has covered a certain distance. I find both cases very believable. There's nothing ridiculous about what Kungsun Lung said. In fact, these instances tell me that Kungsun Lung has a deep understanding of the art of archery."

The scholar was not happy with Prince Mou's rebuttal, so he said, "You are Kungsun Lung's student and friend. Of course you will defend him and ignore his faults. Let me tell you more outrageous things about the man. This time you are not going to find it easy to defend him. Once Kungsun Lung said to the king of Wei: *A person with a mind cannot know;*

*If you can point to it, then you cannot reach it; You can never finish  
dividing something;  
A shadow cannot move;  
A single hair can hold up a thousand stones; A white horse is not a  
horse;  
An orphaned calf has never had a mother.*

"You see, there's no end to Kungsun Lung's perversion of reason."

Prince Mou was not at all bothered by these allegations. Calmly he said, "You think these statements are outrageous only because you cannot understand them. The problem is in you, not Kungsun Lung."

He continued, "Let me explain the meaning of these statements. First, a person with a mind is bound to be filled with conceptions. These conceptions prevent him from knowing things directly, so a person with a mind shall never really know. Second, phenomena in the world are so fleeting that the moment you point to them they are gone. Third, division and differentiation are the processes by which things are created. Since things are emerging and dissolving all the time, you cannot specify the point when this division will stop. Fourth, a shadow is in an effect, not a cause. Therefore, by itself, it cannot move. Only

when a cause is present is there an effect. Fifth, a single hair can hold up a thousand stones if you understand the principle of balance. Moreover, Kungsun Lung's famous statement 'A white horse is not a horse' cautions us not to confuse an object with its qualities. Finally, an orphan calf was not an orphan when it had a mother. In the same way, a cow cannot give birth to an orphan calf because it must be alive to give birth.

"As you can see, Kungsun Lung's statements are far from being empty and outrageous. They are words of wisdom designed to awaken us from ignorance."

The scholar had nothing more to say and left.

The words of the wise are difficult to accept not because they cannot be understood, but because people do not want to understand them. Kungsun Lung was an extraordinary man. His perception and understanding of things were way beyond his time. That is why his contemporaries dismissed his teachings as wild and eccentric. Only Prince Mou understood his wisdom. But Prince Mou was a very wise man himself.

## *Knowing when to withdraw*

WHEN THE EMPEROR YAO had ruled for fifty years, he was unsure whether his empire was in order and whether his subjects accepted him as their ruler. He asked his ministers in the court, but they did not know. He asked the officials in the outlying provinces; they could not tell him. He asked the wise people of the land, but they were unable to help him.

Under these circumstances, Yao had no choice but to disguise himself as a commoner and travel around in his kingdom. One day, as he neared a provincial town, he heard a group of children singing. As he got closer, he made out these words: *You fed us and clothed us.*

*Your laws are our laws.  
Without knowing it,  
We follow the way of heaven.*

Yao was delighted when he heard this. He asked the children, “Where did you learn this song?”

“We heard it from an official,” they replied.

“How did you come by this verse?” Yao asked the official.

“I believe it’s from an old poem.”

Yao returned to his court, summoned his successor Shun, told him what he had seen and heard, and then abdicated. Shun accepted the kingship without question.

When the sage Wen-tzu heard about this, he said, “Someone who knows how to withdraw when his work is finished is one who understands the way of heaven. He has no quarrels with the world and whatever he does follows the natural order of things. There are things that go against the natural way, but the natural way does not go against the order of things. Therefore, the enlightened person does not need eyes to see the Way. This is because the Way cannot be grasped with your senses and thoughts. Look for it in front and it will sneak

behind you. Seek it with good intentions and it is everywhere. If you are insincere, it will never reveal itself. It is something that you cannot use your intellect to attain, but if you are not serious, it will also escape you. Only in naturalness can the Way be attained. And after you have attained it, only in naturalness can it be kept. Knowing the truth of things and yet not clutching to the truth, knowing how to act and not using effort to do it, is the mark of a sage. If you pretend to know or not to know, pretend to do or not to do, you are just like a pile of dirt. It sits there doing nothing, but it is also worth nothing.”

Abdication and retirement are not things that can be forced. Only those who are in tune with the natural way of things know when and how to withdraw. When Yao saw that his country was in order and that there was nothing he could do to make things better, he knew it was time to withdraw. And Shun, who also understood the way of heaven, accepted his responsibilities without hesitation.

## *Part Five / The Questions of T'ang*



## INTRODUCTION

Many things in the world are not as strange as we think they are. Customs and traditions in other cultures may appear shocking at first, but when people of other cultures look at us, they probably have the same initial reaction.

To Lieh-tzu, even the strangest happenings are not anomalous, because all things follow the natural order of the universe. People can acquire incredible skills and perform unbelievable feats because they understand how things work.

The key to understanding the natural order of things is dissolving the barriers between subject and object; knower and known, seer and seen. Whether you are learning archery, fishing, driving, singing, crafting an artifact, playing a musical instrument, or communicating with a friend, the highest level of achievement can only be reached when dualities are dissolved and nothing separates you from everything and everyone.

*Where do things come from?*

THE EMPEROR T'ANG asked a sage, "Have things always been there from the ancient beginning?"

The sage replied, "If things were not there in the beginning, how can they be here now? What do you think of people in the future who ask if there are things now?"

"In this case, would you say there is no such thing as before or after?"

"It is difficult to say when things begin or when they end. The start of one thing may be the end of another. From the ancient beginnings to our time, things continuously come and go. There is no way of knowing what came first."

"Then is there a limit to the universe?"

"I don't know."

The Emperor T'ang pressed further. "There's got to be a boundary somewhere."

The sage then said, "Nothingness is limitless. How do I know where its boundaries are? How do we know that beyond this universe there is not another universe? I can only say that things are limitless, but I cannot tell you if there are any boundaries."

### *The man who tried to move the mountains*

IN A VALLEY SURROUNDED by two high mountains lived an old man. He was nicknamed the Old Fool by his neighbors because he was always thinking up impossible projects.

One day, the Old Fool got tired of having to take a long and roundabout hike to get out of his valley. He called his family together and presented them with the proposal that they remove the mountains that blocked their way.

His son and grandson were very excited about the idea and wanted to start the project right away. The old man's wife, however, was not enthusiastic. She shook her head and said to her husband, "You are ninety years old. You don't even have the strength to remove a small mound of dirt. How can you level two high mountains? Aren't you a bit too ambitious? Anyhow, where would you place the dirt after you've taken down the mountains?"

The old man was not discouraged. "We can dump the rocks into the sea," he said. His son and grandson agreed.

The next day, the Old Fool, with his son and grandson, took shovels and picks and headed for the mountains. On their way, they were joined by a seven-year-old boy from a neighboring family. The four of them worked from sunrise to sunset and did not return home to rest until the winter came.

A wise man in the village who had heard about the Old Fool's attempt at leveling the mountains came to talk the old man out of his foolish project. He said, "At your age you should be wise enough to know that your project is impractical. You are old and weak. You can't even pull up the weeds in your garden. What makes you think you can move a mountain?"

The Old Fool sighed and said, "Your mind is as set as a rock. Even a seven-year-old child is smarter than you are. Can't you see that if I don't finish the project, my son and grandson will continue with it? And if they can't finish moving the mountain, their sons and grandsons will continue, and so on. The mountain, on the other hand, does not grow. So if each generation keeps chipping away, then one day the mountain will be leveled."

The wise man couldn't argue with the Old Fool's logic, so he left.

Time went on, and the Old Fool and his children kept on digging away at the mountain. While everyone laughed at his impossible project, the spirits of the mountain became concerned. They saw that the Old Fool was determined, and there was no question that the mountain was going to be leveled, even if it would be sometime in the distant future.

Alarmed, they went to the lords of heaven and reported their concern. The deities were both curious and amused by the Old Fool's attempt at moving the mountains, but when they saw his patience and determination, they decided to help him. One night they sent two giants to carry the mountain off, one to the east and one to the south. The next morning, when the people looked out from their windows, the mountains that had blocked their way were miraculously gone.

*The man who tried to chase down the sun*

THERE WAS A MAN who prided himself in being a great runner. One day he decided to compete with the sun's journey across the sky, so he chased the sun to the brink of twilight.

By then he was extremely thirsty. He hunted for water and found the Yellow River and the Wei River. After he had drunk the waters dry, he was still thirsty, so he headed for a great marsh up north. Before he could reach it, he died of thirst and fell to the ground. The staff he had carried soaked up the flesh of his decaying body and became a great forest.

People who are proud of their abilities tend to want to push them to the limit. If you push yourself to the limit, then you will try to compete with everything. And if you compete with everything, then one day, like the man who chased the sun, you will lose.

## *The North Country*

YÜ THE SHAMAN-KING said, "Within heaven and earth and the four directions, inside the four seas, everything is lit by the sun and moon, circled by the stars in the sky, regulated by the four seasons, and ruled by the Star of the Year. Things that come from the Great Spirit differ in shape and size. Some live out long lives and some die accidentally. Only the enlightened ones understand the natural way of things and see their place in the universe."

The sage Hsia-chi said, "There are things that do not require the Great Spirit to make them and yet they exist. They do not require the energies of yin and yang to nourish them, nor the sun and moon to light them. They do not need protection to live a long life, nor do they die accidental deaths. They keep warm without clothing, they are filled without needing grains, and they can travel without boats or vehicles. This is the natural way of things."

Later on, when Yü was helping to fight the Great Flood, he lost his way and stumbled into a country far up north. When he asked the inhabitants where he was, they told him he was in the North Country, thousands of miles from his home.

Yü soon found that there were a lot of unusual things in this country. The people had no idea of where the boundaries of the country lay. Where they lived there were no storms or snow, no wild animals, and no forests. They lived on a great plain with miles of grassland. In the middle of the plain was a mountain shaped like a jug. On top of the mountain was a spring. The waters of the spring were sweet and fragrant and they flowed down the mountainside in four clear and sparkling streams. The streams carried the waters all over the land. They regulated the climate and neutralized poisonous gas.

The people were gentle and friendly. Their bodies were soft, their hearts were open, and their minds were clear. Everybody lived together in harmony. There were no quarrels, no jealousies, and no pride. The old lived with the young. There were no politicians or leaders. Men and women mingled freely, and there were no social conventions such as courting or marriage. Everyone lived by the

water. There was no need to cultivate crops or weave cloth for clothing. The people died naturally after living out a hundred years. No one died of illness or disease, and no one was killed accidentally. The people lived in happiness and contentment and did not know anxiety, sorrow, decay, death, or pain.

The people there also loved music and song. They danced and sang all day. When they were tired or when they got hungry, all they needed was to drink the sweet waters of the magic spring and they would be filled with energy again. If they drank too much, they would sleep for ten days. If they bathed in the waters, their bodies would renew their vigor and carry the fragrance of the waters for many days.

When the Emperor Mou of Ch'ou went on his spirit journey, he visited this North Country and stayed there for three years. After he returned home, he thought about this country often and was so occupied with his thoughts that he could neither eat nor sleep.

This country was so unusual that Kuan-chung, the advisor to the king of Ch'i, encouraged his lord to visit it. The two men were about to set out for this fabled land when another minister counseled the king and said, "My lord, why travel to a foreign land when you have everything in your own country? Look around the kingdom of Ch'i. Our mountains and rivers are beautiful, our plains are wide, and our people are happy. Our land yields bountiful harvests and we do not lack anything. Your court is filled with splendor, your ministers are loyal, your soldiers strong, and your subjects are cultured. Everything you could ever want is back here at home. Why do you want to travel to lands that are on the borders of our civilization? Kuan-chung must be fantasizing again."

When the king reported this to Kuan-ching, the advisor simply replied, "This is not something that our friend will understand. I'm afraid if we do not keep the search for the North Country alive, we shall never find it. As for the prosperity of our country, why be so attached to what we have? As for our friend's words, do you really think they carry good advice?"

*Strange customs in strange countries*

IN THE SOUTHERN KINGDOMS, people wear their hair short and go naked. In the northern kingdoms, people wrap turbans around their heads and wear furs. In the central lands, they wear hats and skirts. People of the middle kingdom know how to make the best use of the resources from the land. There are farmers, traders, hunters, and fishermen. Therefore, the people of the central lands are well fed and well clothed. In winter they have furs to keep them warm and in summer they wear cotton to keep themselves cool. They travel by boats and cars, and they do not need to exert a lot of effort to get what they want.

In a land far to the south and east is a country where it is customary for people to kill their firstborn and offer its flesh and blood to everyone in the community to eat. They say this will bring fertility to the women. Moreover, when a father dies, the children tie their mother on the dead man's back and abandon both of them in the wilderness. They claim it is not proper to live with the wife of a ghost. When a relative or family member dies, the children demonstrate their filial duties by cutting off the dead man's skin before they bury his bones.

In a land far south is a country where children are said to be filial only if they burn the bodies of their dead parents. When the smoke rises from the pyre, it is said that the soul of the dead has risen into the sky.

All these customs are established traditions in the countries where they are practiced. They are observed by all the people and there is nothing strange about them. We call them barbaric and are shocked by them only because we have different customs.



### *The questions of a child*

ONCE, WHEN CONFUCIUS was walking through a marketplace, he saw two children who looked like they were arguing heatedly over something. Confucius got curious and went over to ask them what their contention was.

One child said, “I say the sun is nearer us when it is rising and gets farther away at midday.”

The other child immediately said, “I say the sun is farther away when it is rising and nearer us at midday.”

The one who spoke first then said, “The sun looks bigger when it is at the horizon and gets smaller as it reaches noon. Don’t things look smaller when they are far away and bigger when they are near?”

The second child was not daunted. He said, “The sun is hotter at noon than when it rises in the morning. Isn’t something hotter when it is near and cooler when it is farther away?”

Both children then pestered Confucius to answer their questions. Confucius was stumped. He told them he couldn’t tell which of them was correct.

The children laughed and said, “Hey, you’re supposed to be a learned man, and you can’t even answer our questions!”

## *The art of fishing*

MANY THINGS in this world depend on balance. For example, a single hair can hang a weight if the balance is right. The hair only breaks if the balance is off.

Most people do not understand this principle of balance, but here is an example of someone who did.

In the country of Ch'u there lived a man who was fond of fishing. He made his fishing line out of silk, his hook out of the shell of a wheat grain, and his rod out of a slender strip of bamboo. For his bait he used half a grain of rice.

One of his favorite fishing spots was a stretch of deep waters in a fast-flowing river. There he would cast his bait and would always return with a fish as large as his cart. And to top it all off, his line did not snap, his rod did not bend, and his hook did not break.

The king of Ch'u was very curious about the way this man caught fish. He invited the fisherman to his court and asked, "How is it that you can catch such a big fish with that strange assortment of gear?"

The fisherman replied, "I have heard the sages of old talk about an archer who used a bow made of a very weak strip of wood and a bowstring made of a thin string of cotton to shoot down two birds with one arrow. He could do this because his attention was focused and he understood the balance of give and pull. I admired his feat and decided to use him as an example to perfect my skill in fishing. From that time on, I put aside everything and spent all my time learning the art of fishing. Finally, after five years, I could cast my line undistracted. When I sit by the river, my mind is totally concentrated on fishing and nothing else. I have a good feel for the give and pull of the line so the fish are not even aware when the hook and bait enter the water. To them, the bait is no different from a grain of sand or a bubble, and they swallow it without suspecting. This is the principle of using the soft to win over the strong and the light to hold the heavy.

"My lord, if you can rule your country this way, then everything in the world will be at your fingertips. Isn't that more effective than using force?"

The king was very impressed with the fisherman's advice.

### *Exchanging hearts and minds*

TWO MEN WHO FELL ILL went to see the same doctor. The doctor cured both of them, but before they left, he said, “You were both suffering from a disease that attacked your internal organs. That’s something quite common and could be taken care of by acupuncture and herbs. However, there is a virus that is attacking you which affects your hearts and minds. Do you want me to cure this illness for you?”

The two men said, “Let’s hear about it first.”

The doctor then said to one man, “You have strong ambitions, but your willpower is weak. Although you are good at planning, you can seldom see the plans through.”

Turning to the other man, the doctor said, “You, on the other hand, are the opposite. Your ambitions are weak but your willpower is strong. Therefore, you get into trouble by doing things recklessly without thinking them through.”

Then, to both of them, he said, “If the two of you can exchange your hearts and minds, then you’d both be perfect. Now, do you want me to do that for you?”

Both his patients agreed.

The doctor gave them a drug that made them unconscious for several days. Then, carefully, he removed their hearts, exchanged them, and applied a magical herb so that when both men woke up there were no physical signs of the surgery.

As the men walked home they were delighted, but the moment they stepped in their houses, trouble began. The first man had gone to the second man’s home and was not recognized by the wife and children. The second man had gone to the first man’s home and the same thing happened. Both families were angry and frustrated. They went to the law courts to settle the matter and only accepted the circumstances when the doctor explained the whole situation to them.

No one is born perfect, and even if science or technology can do wonders, solving one problem will create another. Therefore, it is better to accept who we are and not want to be someone else, for each person has his value.

*Musician Wen learns to play the lute*

A LONG TIME AGO there was a musician who could charm birds and fish into dancing with his music. A lute player named Wen from the kingdom of Cheng heard the story and wanted to acquire the skill. So he left his family and went to study with the master musician Hsiang.

For a long time Wen could not play anything. His fingers were tied up in knots, and every time he picked up the lute he could not bring himself to play. After three years he had learned nothing. “You might as well go home,” his teacher said.

Wen put down his lute, sighed and said, “It’s not that I haven’t learned any songs or that I can’t tune my instrument properly. I cannot play from my heart, so the music has never become a part of me. That’s why I can’t bring myself to play. Let me rest a bit and see what happens.”

No long afterward, Wen returned to his teacher.

“How are you getting along with your music?” his teacher asked.

“I think I’ve experienced a breakthrough. Let me show you.”

Wen took the lute and gently touched the string called Autumn. Although it was springtime, a cool wind blew, the leaves crackled in the autumn breeze, and the sky was bright and cloudless. Then in autumn he touched the string called Spring, and a gentle wind came. Warm rains fell and the flowers bloomed. In the middle of summer, Wen touched the string called Winter, and suddenly the snow fell and the rivers froze. When winter came, he touched the string called Summer. Immediately the sun shone fiercely, the snow disappeared, and the ice melted from the rivers.

Finally, when he touched the last string and played all of them together, a refreshing wind blew, azure clouds floated overhead, sweet dew fell, and fragrant springs bubbled up from the ground.

The master musician Hsiang clapped his chest and exclaimed. “Your music far surpasses what words can describe. The greatest players will have to learn from you now.”

Wen was already an accomplished musician by the time he went to study with Hsiang, but he realized that perfection in technique alone does not make great music. When he was finally able to dissolve the duality between himself and the music, the songs he played not only had the power to create moods but literally changed reality.

*When Han-erh sang*

THERE WAS A MUSICIAN who apprenticed himself to a master singer, but before he had finished his training he decided he had already mastered all the skills his teacher could offer. Confident, he asked to be graduated so he could return home.

His teacher did not contest this request, and on the appointed day he threw a feast for the graduate after the ceremony. When everyone was seated around the table, the master singer began a sad song, beating the rhythm with a small drum. His voice shook the leaves on the trees and stilled the flying clouds. The brash young student now realized how pretentious he was in thinking he had learned everything from his teacher. Quickly he apologized and asked to be accepted again. "I shall stay as your student for the rest of my life," he said to his teacher.

The master singer then told a story for everyone to hear. He said:

"Once there was a woman called Han-erh who ran out of money while she was traveling to the eastern country of Ch'i. She had no choice but to sing at a local tavern to earn her supper. After she had left, the sound of her voice reverberated in the room for three days, and people thought she was still around.

"Later, Han-erh stayed at an inn where the owner ridiculed her foreign manners. This made Han-erh homesick, and she burst into a song of sadness and longing. Her voice traveled through the town and sent everyone into tears. The people of the town were so affected by the sadness of the song that they could not eat for three days. They sent someone after Han-erh and invited her back.

"Han-erh let out a long note and then sang a song of joy. Soon the townspeople started dancing and laughing and forgot they had been sad just before. Han-erh stayed with these people for a while and when she left, the town sent her off with many rich gifts. To this day, the people of that town are famous for their singing because they picked up some of Han-erh's art while she lived there."

*Kindred spirits*

PO-YA AND CHUNG TZU-CH'I were good friends. Po-ya was a good lute player and his friend was an intuitive listener.

When Po-ya had his mind on the high mountains while he played, Chung Tzu-ch'i said, "I can feel the grandeur of the Great Mountains!"

When Po-ya thought about flowing waters while he played, his friend said, "How deep and wide are the Yellow River and the Yang-tze!"

It seemed no matter what was on Po-ya's mind which he expressed in his music, his friend shared the feelings right away.

One time the two friends were wandering around in the north slopes of the Great Mountains when a rainstorm hit. They found shelter in a cave, and, waiting for the rains to subside, Po-ya took up his lute and played. Seeing the mist and rain hiding the mountains, Po-ya had a feeling of sadness and composed a piece about the unending rain and rising mist. Then he changed his mood and improvised a song that painted the splendor of an avalanche crashing down the mountains. In every piece he played, Chung Tzu-ch'i could grasp Po-ya's feel of the music without fail. His mood and state of mind were identical to those of the player.

Po-ya put down his lute and sighed, "This is more than my wildest expectations. You can read my mind by listening to my music. From now on, how can I hide anything from you?"

Po-ya and Chung Tzu-ch'i were not only good friends but kindred spirits. They could reach into each other's minds not just because one of them was a good player and the other an intuitive listener. It was because they had dissolved the barriers that separated them from each other and the music was simply a bridge that allowed them to communicate their hearts and minds.



### *Artificial or real?*

KING MU OF CH'OU was touring the western region of his country. He went as far as the Kun-lun Mountains before he turned back. On the way home, his officers introduced to him a man who was reputed to be a very skilled craftsman.

The king received the craftsman in his tent and said, "Tell me about your skills."

The man replied, "I can make anything you want, but let me show you something I've already completed."

"Good," said King Mu. "Bring it the next time you come."

Two days later the craftsman asked to see the king again. The king saw that the craftsman had brought someone with him, so he asked, "Who is this man you've brought with you?"

"He is my creation," the craftsman said proudly. "He can talk, he can sing, and he can dance."

The king was both fascinated and amazed. The figure before him was walking around briskly and certainly had all the features of a human.

The craftsman pressed the cheeks of his companion, and immediately the figure started singing. When he squeezed its hand, it started to dance to the rhythm of the song. Then the craftsman had his "creation" do all kinds of tricks, which the king enjoyed immensely. The movements and mannerisms of the figure were so real that the king thought it was a real person.

The king arranged to have this very talented "man" give a show and invited his favorite courtesan and other female attendants to attend. When the show was about to end, the artificial man made suggestive glances at the women who sat around the king.

King Mu saw this and was outraged. He summoned the craftsman and shouted at him angrily, "How dare you lie to me that you've created this man! He had the nerve to flirt with my courtesans. I shall have you executed for this."

Terrified, the craftsman immediately went over to the artificial man and ripped open its body. He disassembled its head, arms, and legs and showed the

pieces to the king. The king examined them and found they were made of wood and hide held together by strings and glue. The craftsman then emptied the insides of the robot, and the king saw that although the internal organs looked real, they too were made of inert materials and painted with the appropriate colors. Teeth, bones, muscles, tendons, joints, skin, and hair were all artificial. However, when these parts were all assembled, he saw a lifelike person.

The king was even more curious now. He reexamined the robot and experimented with taking out its heart. When the heart was removed, the robot lost its speech. Next the king removed the liver, and the robot lost its sight. When he took out the kidneys, it couldn't walk. The king was finally satisfied. He sighed and said, "Could it be possible that human skill can produce something that can match what is created by heaven and earth?"

The king had the robot loaded onto a cart and invited the craftsman to return with him to the capital.

People used to regard Kung-shu Pan's ladder that reached to the clouds and Mo-tzu's flying machine as crafts of great skill. But when the news of the artificial man spread, these two talented craftsmen dared not boast about their inventions anymore.

Looking back at King Mu's robot, can we really say it is artificial? The robot was made of materials found in nature—leather, bark, and hemp. Humans are also made of the same stuff as nature, for all things emerged from the gathering of yin and yang vapors and owe their existence to the primordial breath of the Tao. Whether something is real or artificial depends on how we view the materials from which it is made. If this is the case, then as "real" persons, what makes us more privileged than other things in creation?

## *Learning the art of archery*

FEI-WEI LEARNED ARCHERY from one of the greatest archers. It was said that when his master drew his bow, the animals would lie still on the ground and birds would drop from the sky. Fei-wei learned everything his master could teach him and eventually surpassed the older man in skill.

A man named Chi-ch'ang heard about Fei-wei's mastery of the bow and begged to become his apprentice. He hoped that one day he too would be able to best his teacher in his skill.

Fei-wei told the prospective student, "First you need to train your eye not to blink under any circumstances. Come back when you have accomplished this."

Chi-ch'ang put these words in his mind and returned home. Day after day he lay underneath his wife's loom with his eyes next to the needles that went up and down when her foot pressed the pedal. After three years he had trained himself not to blink even when the needles came close to piercing his eyeball.

Excited about his success, Chi-ch'ang ran to Fei-wei and reported his progress. Fei-wei only said, "You have just started to learn. The next thing you need to do is to train your eye to look at small objects until they appear large, and fuzzy objects until they appear clear. Go back and practice. When you have succeeded in doing this, you can come and see me."

Chi-ch'ang went home again and began his next phase of training. He caught a flea and hung it from a window that faced south. Every day he stared at the flea with the sun shining into his eyes. Ten days later, the flea appeared to grow in size. Three years later, the flea looked as big as a wheel on a cart. By then, when Chi-ch'ang looked at other things in the same way, he saw hills and mountains. Taking a bow made from the horn of an animal of Yen and an arrow made from wild grass from the north, Chi-ch'ang took aim and shot. The arrow pierced the heart of the flea without breaking the strand of hair that the flea hung from.

When Chi-ch'ang related this to Fei-wei, the master archer clapped his hands and said, "Wonderful. You have understood what archery is all about. You are now ready to learn."

Not long afterward, Chi-ch'ang learned everything that Fei-wei could teach him. He went home and thought, "Right now, the only person who can rival my skill is my master. If I kill him, then I shall be the greatest archer alive."

One day, Chi-ch'ang met Fei-wei on a deserted road. Seeing his chance in killing his former teacher, he pulled his bow and sent an arrow toward Fei-wei. Almost simultaneously the master pulled his bow. The two arrows hit each other at the same distance between the two men and dropped to the ground without raising any dust. Swiftly Chi-ch'ang shot several arrows toward Fei-wei, and each time the arrows were stopped in mid-flight.

Finally, Chi-ch'ang was down to one arrow and Fei-wei's quiver was empty. "This is my chance to kill him," Chi-ch'ang said to himself. So he drew his bow and let off the last arrow. Fei-wei calmly picked up a thorny branch, and, using it as an arrow, stopped Chi-ch'ang's arrow in mid-air.

Seeing this, both men threw down their bows. With tears in their eyes, they bowed to each other. So great was their respect for each other that they pledged on the spot to become father and son. Not wanting their skills to be a cause of jealousy and treachery for future generations, they made cuts in their arms and took an oath never to reveal the secrets of their technique to others.

Chi-ch'ang was proud and ambitious and wanted to be the best. However, he was moved by Fei-wei's mastery and realized that what he had seen was the greatest feat of archery. Fei-wei, too, was impressed with Chi-ch'ang's intelligence and his single-mindedness in accomplishing what he had set out to do. It is said that the pinnacle of achievement is a lonely place and sometimes rivals can understand and appreciate each other more than friends can. So it is not uncommon that the greatest rivals can become the best of friends.

*Tsao-fu learns to drive*

TSAO-FU APPRENTICED HIMSELF to a famous charioteer whose skill was legendary. For many years, Tsao-fu served his teacher humbly but did not receive any instruction. This did not discourage the apprentice. In fact, Tsao-fu showed even more respect and diligence in attending to his master's needs.

Finally, impressed by Tsao-fu's sincerity, the master charioteer said to his student, "The ancients say that a master bowmaker starts out by making baskets and a master blacksmith starts out by making hammers. Now watch me carefully. If you can get to the same state of body and mind that I am in, then you will be able to drive a chariot."

"I shall follow your instructions carefully," said Tsao-fu.

The master then took several posts, just large enough to stand on, and sunk them into the ground. The posts were arranged so that they were about a stride apart. Then the master charioteer jumped onto the posts and stepped from one post to another, running back and forth with ease.

"Practice running on the posts," he told Tsao-fu, "and when you've mastered this, I shall give you further instructions."

After three days Tsao-fu was able to run around on the posts without stumbling or falling. His master sighed and said, "You are agile and you learn fast. Now let me tell you about charioteering. All charioteers must start by learning how to run on the posts. Although it appears that you are training to be agile in your footwork, you are actually training your body to respond to the commands of your mind. This is the key to driving a chariot.

"Applying and releasing pressure in the reins should be at one with your intention. If your fingers and your palms respond naturally to your will, then you can transfer your intention directly to each horse on the team. The team will respond to the smallest pull or slack in any direction, and you can guide the chariot forward or backward and turn left or right without any effort. Your body responds to your mind, the reins respond to the movements of your body, and the horses respond to the pressure from the reins. In this way, without expending

any energy, you can drive a chariot over long distances and not feel tired. When this happens, you know you have mastered this art.”

After a while the master charioteer continued, “Let me elaborate on what I have said. Each horse pulling the chariot wears a bit and a bridle. Thus, the feel of the horse’s movement is communicated through the bit to the bridle, from the bridle to the reins, from the reins to your hands, from the hands to the rest of your body, and from your body to your mind. When you communicate your intention to the horses, it is simply this sequence of commands in reverse. Thus, controlling your team and getting feedback from the horses’ movements can be totally done by intention alone. In this way you can drive without your eyes and you will never need to use a whip. When your mind is clear and your body is relaxed, you can control six bridles without confusion, and twenty-four hooves will step where you want them. Then the wheels of your chariot will move forward and in reverse, and turn left and right with precision and control. You can drive on mountain roads with the same ease as you would on the plains. Your driving will not be different whether your horses are stepping close to the edge of a cliff or running on flat grassland. That is all I have to teach, so remember it well!”

Agility of body and stillness of mind are required for intention to be communicated naturally. A stiff body whose parts do not cooperate cannot respond to intention no matter how clear and still the mind is. Likewise, an agile body will only meet with confusion if the mind is not still. Therefore, to attain the highest level of any skill, both body and mind must be trained simultaneously.

### *Lai-tan's revenge*

LAI-TAN'S FATHER was killed by Hei-luan in a heated dispute. Lai-tan swore he would find the killer and avenge his father's death.

Although Lai-tan had a fearless disposition and intense perseverance, he was as thin as a wraith. His stomach could only hold a handful of grains, and he was so weak that a strong wind could sweep him off his feet. Therefore, despite his intent of avenging his father's death, Lai-tan was incapable of handling any kind of weapon. However, Lai-tan had a sense of honor and would not hire someone to fight for him. So, ashamed of his weakness and angry that he could do nothing, he fretted day and night.

As if things weren't bad enough, Hei-luan, the killer of Lai-tan's father, was a very strong and violent man. Hei-luan could swing the heaviest sword and fight a hundred men bare-handed. Moreover, the man had skin like bark that could not be penetrated by sword or spear. He would flaunt his abilities by blocking swords with his neck or stopping arrows with his bare chest. The swords and arrows would break without leaving a scar or scratch on his body. He therefore taunted and laughed at Lai-tan, calling the weak man a helpless chick.

One day a friend of Lai-tan's said to him, "Hei-luan behaves as if you were a piece of dung. What are you going to do about it?"

Lai-tan got even more depressed and said to his friend, "I don't know what I'm going to do. Do you have any suggestions?"

His friend replied, "I have heard that in the country of Wei is a nobleman who has a magic sword. This sword is so powerful that it can drive away a whole army even when it is wielded by a child. Why not go and ask if you can borrow that sword?"

Lai-tan took his friend's advice and journeyed to the land of Wei. He begged the nobleman to help him and offered to be a bonded servant. Next, he explained his situation, asked to borrow the magic sword, and promised to leave his wife and children as hostages in the nobleman's estate while he went to look for the killer.

The nobleman listened to Lai-tan's pleas and was impressed with the young man's determination to overcome seemingly insurmountable hardships. So he said, "I have three magic swords, but none of them can kill. I will let you borrow one of them for avenging your father's death. But before you choose, let me describe the characteristics of each of these swords for you.

"The first sword is called Invisible Light. It has no shape, so you cannot see it. It is weightless, so you cannot feel it when you wield it. It leaves no mark when it cuts, and it can slice through a victim's body without him even knowing it.

"The second one is called the Shadow Sword. If you take this sword and hold it against the soft morning or evening light, you can barely see it. If it cuts something, there is a slight swishing sound. When it pierces a body the victim does not feel any pain.

"My third sword is called the Night Sword. In the daylight, you can only see its shadow but not its glitter. In the night, you can see its glow but not its shape. When it cuts something, you hear a slashing sound. The wound it makes closes immediately and no blood is shed. The victim only feels slight pain where the sword has cut.

"These three swords have been passed down to me through thirteen generations in my family. They have never been used and are still sealed inside their special cases."

Lai-tan asked to borrow the Night Sword.

The nobleman then told Lai-tan that a special ritual was needed to break the seal that locked the sword. He fasted for seven days, did the appropriate rituals of purification, and brought the sword out of its case in the middle of the night. He handed the sword to Lai-tan and told him there was no need to leave his wife and children as hostages. Lai-tan bowed in thanks and set out to find Hei-luan.

When Lai-tan arrived at Hei-luan's house, he found the man alone and drunk. Seeing his chance, Lai-tan lifted the sword and slashed Hei-luan effortlessly three times from the neck down to the waist. When Hei-luan did not stir, Lai-tan thought he had killed the man, so he hurried out. At the door he ran into Hei-luan's son. Swiftly he raised the Night Sword and struck him three times. Again, he felt like cutting through thin air.

Hei-luan's son smiled cordially and asked Lai-tan, "You're a funny man. Why did you wave your hand around me like that?"

Lai-tan knew his sword could not kill, so he sighed and went away.

When Hei-luan woke up, he shouted at his wife, "Why didn't you cover me when I passed out? Now I have a sore throat and my waist hurts."

Hei-luan's son then said, "Father, when I came home yesterday I met Lai-tan at the door of our house. He waved his hand at me in a funny way and then



walked away. Now my body is hurting a bit and my arms and legs are aching. Do you think he's laid a curse on us?"

Lai-tan did not kill Hei-luan, but he got his revenge. It did not matter that Hei-luan did not die. To Lai-tan, all that mattered was that he had swung the sword and hit his father's killer with his own hands. The Night Sword was indeed a powerful sword. Not only did it not kill or hurt, but it had helped Lai-tan dissipate his anger and made him feel he had accomplished his goal. If Lai-tan had used a lesser sword to avenge his father, then he would have killed Hei-luan and Hei-luan's son. Hei-luan's family would then seek Lai-tan for revenge, and the killing would go on, family avenging family, for many generations.

## *Part Six / Effort and Destiny*

## INTRODUCTION

The farmer is dependent on the mercy of weather, the merchant on the economy, the artisan on timely application of skills, and the politician on public opinion. In agriculture there are seasons of plenty and seasons of drought. In business and commerce there are boom times and recessions. Success in design and manufacturing depends on demand in the market. Popularity of government depends on political preference. There is no profession that guarantees success. Success and failure depend on timeliness, which we can neither control nor predict. This is what Lieh-tzu means by destiny.

Timeliness can make or break a career. A talented person may never realize his or her potential without the proper opportunities. On the other hand, someone with average abilities may rise to great fame and fortune if the times are right. Therefore, fortune and misfortune depend on destiny.

Whether someone is fortunate or unfortunate also depends on when the situation is evaluated. Thus, something that may appear unfortunate now may actually be beneficial in the long run, and vice versa. Since we don't know how long "the long run" is, it is impossible to tell whether something is fortunate or unfortunate.

Moreover, whether something is considered good fortune or misfortune will depend on a person's outlook. Typically, people who are less attached to external circumstances will be less eager to label something as fortune or misfortune. Our empathy toward another person's misfortune is based on the assumption that if the same circumstances were to happen to us, we would feel bad and want to be pitied. Therefore, empathy may be based on self-pity rather than compassion toward others.

Given all this, Lieh-tzu asks, why must we be so attached to success and failure, fortune and misfortune? Why spend so much effort pursuing what we consider at present to be success or fortune? What may be beneficial now may be harmful later. And if it turns out to be harmful, who can say it may not be beneficial in the future?

*Effort argues with Destiny*

ONE DAY EFFORT SAID to Destiny, "My achievements are greater than yours."

Destiny did not agree. He challenged Effort immediately: "What have you done to make your achievements surpass mine?"

Effort said, "Whether someone lives long or dies young, is rich or poor, will succeed or fail depends on me."

Destiny said at once, "Old P'eng's intelligence did not match that of the emperors Yao and Shun, but he lived a long and healthy life. On the other hand, Yen-hui, Confucius's best student, died when he was eighteen. Confucius's virtue far surpassed that of the feudal lords, but compared with them he was destitute. The emperor Shang-t'sou was cruel and immoral but lived a prosperous and long life. On the other hand, his ministers who were virtuous met with violent deaths. There was a man who sacrificed his own fortune to allow his brother a chance to be employed by the lord of Cheng. He remained poor and unknown for the rest of his life. Then there was another man who had neither virtue nor ability who became the lord of Ch'i. How about Po-yi and Shu-ch'i who starved to death in the mountains because they would not compromise their integrity and honor to serve an enemy lord? What can you say about corrupt officials who are rich, or honest, hard-working people who are poor?"

Effort had not expected this barrage of evidence against his assertion. He frowned, but Destiny continued, "If you are as effective as you say, then why don't you make the hard-working people rich? Why don't you give virtuous people a long and prosperous life? Why are the intelligent and able people not employed, and why do stupid people occupy important places in government?"

Effort had no more to say in the face of these challenges, so sheepishly he said to Destiny, "You are right. I do not have much effect after all. But I daresay a lot of things happen the way they do because you've been up to mischief, twisting people's destiny around and enjoying it!"

Destiny then said, "I cannot force the directions of things. I merely open doors for them to go through. If something is going straight, I let it follow the straight

path; if something takes a turn, I do not hinder it. No one, not you or I, can direct the path of things. Long life or short, rich or poor, success or failure, fortune or misfortune, all come about by themselves. How can I direct events or even know where things will end up?"

*Fortune and worth*

ONE DAY PEI-KUNG-TZU visited Hsi-men-tzu. The two were friends, but due to different things that had happened in their lives, they had not seen each other for a long time.

When Peikung-tzu saw his friend, the first thing he said was:

“We grew up together. We live in the same times. How come everything seems to be going your way but I am always stopped by obstacles? We come from the same clan, but people respect you and despise me. Like you I have eyes, ears, and a mouth, but people greet you and walk away from me. Sometimes we have similar opinions and even talk the same way, but you are listened to and I am ignored. When we are seen together, you are treated as an honest man and I am not trusted. When we both took office in government, you were promoted and I was dismissed. When we both farmed, even the earth cooperated with you and not with me. When we traded together, you made profits and I lost. This is really unfair!”

Peikung-tzu continued bemoaning his troubles.

“I wear old clothing and eat food that the pig would eat. I live in a broken shack and cannot afford a cart. You, on the other hand, wear silks and fine cloth. You eat the finest meat and grains. You live in a large mansion and travel around in a carriage pulled by fine horses. You ignore me on the streets and you never invite me to your banquets or outings. Is this the way to treat a friend? Or do you think you are more virtuous and worthy than I am?”

Hsi-men-tzu was not very happy with Peikung-tzu’s outburst. So he said curtly, “I don’t know who’s more virtuous, you or I. All I know is that things always go right with me and they always go wrong with you. Perhaps I am more virtuous and therefore more worthy in the eyes of others. In any case, you have the gall to compare your worthiness with mine! Don’t you have any sense of shame?”

Peikung-tzu did not expect this slap in the face. Hurt and dejected, he left without a word.

On his way home Peikung-tzu ran into the sage Tung-kuo. Seeing Peikung-tzu's despondent look, Tung-kuo asked, "Where have you been? Why do you look so depressed?"

Peikung-tzu told Tung-kuo what had happened during his visit to Hsi-men-tzu's.

Tung-kuo said kindly, "Don't feel so bad. We shall go over to Hsi-men-tzu's and have a talk with him."

When Tung-kuo saw Hsi-men-tzu, he said, "Why did you insult your friend and hurt his feelings?"

Hsi-men-tzu said, "Peikung-tzu said that his age, his background, and his education are the same as mine, but while I am rich, successful, and respected, he is poor, despised, and a failure in life. I told him it's because he is not as worthy as I am."

Tung-kuo then said to Hsi-men-tzu, "You seem to think worth can be measured by social or political success. I see it differently. It seems to me you have more luck and Peikung-tzu actually has more virtue. You are successful in society not because you are particularly wise or virtuous but because you have luck in everything you do. On the other hand, Peikung-tzu's failure to be recognized is not due to stupidity or lack of virtue. It's because he does not have luck in everything he does.

"Whether you have luck or not is not something you can control. You should not be presumptuous because you have more luck. On the other hand, he should not feel worthless although he has more virtue. Both of you are equally blinded by your own ideas of worthiness."

When Hsi-men-tzu heard this, he said, "You need not speak anymore. I shall never boast about my success again."

When Peikung-tzu returned home he was not ashamed of being worthless anymore. He wore his clothes and felt as if they were luxurious silks and furs. He ate simple foods and found them as tasteful as the best gourmet foods in town. He lived in a shack and felt as if he were living in a large mansion. When he traveled in his broken cart, he felt it was the finest carriage. He no longer saw the difference between honor and disgrace, recognition and anonymity. In this way, he passed the rest of his life in contentment.

When the sage Tung-kuo saw the transformation in Peikung-tzu, he said, "For a long time this man was buried in illusions of worth and value established by social norms. But it is also remarkable that he only needed one lesson to cut through these illusions. If only more people could be like him!"

### *The friendship of Kuanchung and Pao Shu-ya*

KUANCHUNG AND PAO SHU-YA were the best of friends. They both grew up in the country of Ch'i and both served in the royal court as teachers of princes.

At that time the kingdom of Ch'i was in political turmoil. There were many intrigues in the capital surrounding the rivalry between princes who aspired to become heir to the throne. Kuanchung counseled his protégé to find support in the kingdom of Lu, and Pao Shu-ya advised his prince to stay away from the capital and bide his time.

The court politics soon turned vicious. The king of Ch'i was assassinated in a coup by a general who in turn was killed by rivals. The country was in chaos. Both Kuanchung and Pao Shu-ya advised their princes that it was time to stake their claims to the throne.

In a battle outside the capital, the armies of the two princes met. Kuanchung shot an arrow at the rival prince which bounced off the prince's belt buckle. Infuriated and insulted, the prince returned to his camp. But in the end, Kuanchung's army was defeated, and both he and his lord had to flee to the nearby kingdom of Lu. Pao Shu-ya's prince entered the capital and became the king of Ch'i. Immediately, the new king led an army into Lu, where he killed his brother. Kuanchung surrendered, but the other advisor chose to die with his lord.

When the king returned to the capital, Pao Shu-ya, who was now a minister, said to his lord, "Now that the war is over, we can turn our attention to building the country. Kuanchung is a very able man. He can help you to make Ch'i the most powerful state among the feudal kingdoms."

The king said, "He insulted me on the battlefield. I was planning to have him executed."

Pao Shu-ya said, "A wise ruler does not let personal grudges cloud his judgment of people's abilities. Moreover, a good ruler always thinks about the welfare of his country first and his personal needs second. If you want Ch'i to become powerful and prosperous, you need Kuanchung's help."

The king had great respect for his former tutor, so he accepted Pao Shu-ya's



advice. He ordered Kuanchung to be released from the prison camp outside the city and brought into the court. Pao Shu-ya personally went to meet his friend and accompanied him into the capital.

Kuanchung impressed the king so much that he was immediately given the position of chief minister, which ranked him above Pao Shuya. In time, the king's trust in Kuanchung grew, and eventually he gave him the honored title of eldest statesman. Kuanchung thus became the most powerful man in the kingdom of Ch'i, second only to the king. Pao Shu-ya was neither jealous nor resentful of Kuanchung's success. They remained the best of friends, for Pao Shu-ya respected Kuanchung's abilities and knew that if the lord of Ch'i was a wise ruler, he would entrust the highest responsibilities to Kuanchung. And Kuanchung did not disappoint his king. Under his guidance, Ch'i became the most powerful state among the feudal kingdoms.

Kuanchung did not let his success affect his friendship with Pao Shuya. Often he would say, "If not for Pao Shu-ya, I would not be where I am today. When we were children, I always took a larger share of everything we found. He didn't argue with me and never considered me greedy because he knew I came from a poor family that never had enough of anything. When we made plans together for our little enterprises, Pao Shu-ya accepted my advice, but when things did not turn out, he never blamed me for stupidity, for he knew that success and failure often depend more on luck than effort. As a young man I served in the civil service three times and each time was fired from my job. Pao Shuya did not think I was worthless because he knew the opportunities were just not right for me. Three times I went into battle, and three times I escaped rather than face capture. Pao Shu-ya did not think that I was a coward because he knew I needed to look after my aging mother. In the final battle when the princes fought for the throne, when my fellow advisor chose to die with his lord and I surrendered, Pao Shu-ya did not consider my actions shameful, because he knew that heroics are sometimes folly. Therefore, although my parents gave me life and nourished me, it is Pao Shu-ya who really understands me."

True friendship is not simply looking out for your friends and ignoring their faults. Pao Shu-ya did not recommend Kuanchung to the king because he wanted to do his friend a favor. It was because he understood Kuanchung's genius in managing the affairs of a state and did not let his own personal ambitions prevent his friend from taking office. If Kuanchung had not been capable, Pao Shu-ya would not have recommended him, and Kuanchung in turn would not have begrudged his friend for not supporting him. When Pao Shu-ya became Kuanchung's subordinate, he was not resentful, but neither was Kuanchung hesitant in accepting his office. Kuanchung knew that Pao Shu-ya would not be

offended. Both men knew that no matter what happened in the political arena, it would not affect their friendship. This is what true friendship should be.

After a long and distinguished service as chief minister in Ch'i, Kuanchung fell seriously ill. The king was worried and distressed because it appeared that Kuanchung was not going to recover. He visited his minister, sat by his bed, and asked, "You are very ill and are not getting better, so I shall be honest and straightforward with you. If one day you should die, who is the best person to take your place?"

Kuanchung did not answer. Instead he asked the king, "Do you have anyone in mind?"

"I am considering Pao Shu-ya."

Kuanchung counseled the king, "Pao Shu-ya is not suitable for the position of chief minister. He has very high moral standards and is often inflexible. He does not tolerate people who are lesser than he in virtue or ability. If he sees someone make a mistake, he will discredit that person and remember the instance for the rest of his life. If you use Pao Shu-ya as your chief minister, there will be disharmony in the court. People will be afraid to serve you, and your subjects will lose their trust in you. Sooner or later, you will find Pao Shu-ya offensive or he will find you offensive, and you will have to dismiss him. No, Pao Shu-ya is best used where he is now."

"Then, whom would you recommend?"

Kuanchung said, "If you really want me to name someone, I would suggest Hsi-p'eng. Hsi-p'eng is humble and unassuming. He can occupy a high position and yet forget he is powerful. He will be respected by his subordinates, and at the same time he will not intimidate them. He does not compare himself with the sages. He recognizes his own shortcomings and is patient and tolerant. He is someone his subordinates would feel comfortable working with.

"I think we will agree that the man who can inspire others with his virtue is a sage, and the man who can share his wisdom with others is worthy of respect. Hsi-p'eng is precisely this kind of man. However, a man who despises those who do not measure up to his standard will not gain the respect of others, and a man who never forgets or forgives other people's mistakes cannot win their hearts.

"You do not want your chief advisor to be someone who is so rigid about virtue that everything appears wrong in his eyes. You do not want a perfectionist who criticizes and never encourages. Ideally, you want someone who knows when to point out problems and when to look the other way and let things be. This person will not look for perfection in his subordinates, his family, or his king. As far as I can see, Hsi-p'eng is very close to this ideal."

In the end, the king of Ch'i took Kuanchung's advice and employed Hsi-p'eng to be his chief minister.

Many people would say Kuanchung was harsh in his evaluation of Pao Shu-ya and did not remember what his friend had done for him. But Kuanchung was not the kind of man who would jeopardize a country's safety for the sake of personal favors. In fact, Kuanchung realized that true friendship does not depend on favors or positive evaluation. That was why he was candid about Pao Shu-ya's abilities and character when the king asked him for advice. Kuanchung was also certain his friend would understand his candidness and would not be hurt by Kuanchung's honest evaluation.

Why did things turn out the way they did for Kuanchung, Pao Shuya, and Hsi-p'eng? It was not because Pao Shu-ya favored his friend initially, or Kuanchung ignored his friend toward the end of his life, or Hsi-p'eng was favored. It was because of Kuanchung and Pao Shu-ya's friendship. Neither of them could have acted otherwise. It was because of their abilities that Kuanchung was chosen in the first instance and Hsi-p'eng was chosen to be Kuanchung's successor. However, if the king of Ch'i had not been a wise ruler and had not listened to words of wisdom and reason, neither man would have been chosen as chief minister at all. If we continue to analyze the situation we could go on indefinitely and find more reasons why one man was chosen and the other wasn't. And we would conclude that things happened the way they did because other things happened to make them happen. Thus, whether someone is favored or neglected, used or dismissed is not a function of their effort or even another person's effort. It is because many factors come together so that the events could not have unfolded otherwise.

*Are life and death a matter of effort or destiny?*

TENG-HSI WAS a prominent official in the state of Cheng who delighted in finding fault with others and playing the devil's advocate. He loved to make ambiguous statements that stirred up conflict and contention among the government administrators.

Tzu-ch'an was a minister who ruled Cheng with an iron fist. Concerned with the rise of criminal activities in the state, Tzu-ch'an adopted a code of regulations that called for stricter enforcement of law and order. Administrators and citizens all welcomed this new legislation, except for Teng-hsi, who criticized Tzu-ch'an and his new code of law. This made Tzu-ch'an extremely angry. Not only was Teng-hsi criticizing him, but, as usual, Teng-hsi's assertions stirred up arguments and conflict in the higher levels of the government. Soon, the government officials were divided into two camps: those who supported Tzu-ch'an and those who agreed with Teng-hsi.

One day, without warning, Tzu-ch'an had Teng-hsi arrested and executed.

Did Tzu-ch'an have to kill Teng-hsi? Had Teng-hsi really committed such a serious crime to deserve to be executed? Under the circumstances, Tzu-ch'an had no other choice because he knew how dangerous a disrupting influence could be for a country that was always threatened by invasion and plagued by internal disorder. On the other hand, knowing Tzu-ch'an's unbending iron rule, why did Teng-hsi play the devil's advocate and invite trouble for himself? We can also say that Teng-hsi had no choice because it was natural for him to criticize everything under the sun. Thus, it was not Tzu-ch'an's doing that killed Teng-hsi, nor did Teng-hsi bring death upon himself. Things could not have happened otherwise given the circumstances and given the natural dispositions of the two men.

In the natural order of things, life and death are not something we can control. It is a blessing to be able to live and die at the right time. To live when it is not appropriate to live and to die when it is not time to die is punishment. Similarly, not to be able to live when you should live and not to be able to die when you

should die is suffering. But whether we live and die at the right time is not something we can control. Rather, it is something that happens in the context of and as a consequence of many other events.

The ancients say that the ways in which things happen are limitless and unknowable. Following the laws of transformation in heaven and earth, boundless and unceasing, the cycles of change come about by themselves. Heaven and earth and all things cannot go against this natural order. The wisdom of the sages cannot modify it and demons cannot escape it. All things come and go without the need of a creator or mover to make them happen. Silently their presence is recognized, harmoniously their existence is accepted, and peacefully their departure is acknowledged.

*An average doctor, a good doctor, and an ingenious doctor*

YANG-CHU'S FRIEND fell ill. The man's sons counseled their father to call a doctor, but Yang-chu's friend refused. After ten days, the illness went from bad to worse. The sons sat by their father's bedside and wept bitterly.

One day Yang-chu came to visit his friend. Finding the whole house in mourning, he said, "What's all this weeping?" His friend sighed and replied, "My sons are so thick-headed! Why don't you sing a song to wake them up?"

So Yang-chu sang:

*If heaven does not know, how can mortals know?  
If heaven does not bless you, crying won't help.  
If we all weep together,  
Will it lengthen life and chase away death?  
Even doctors and shamans are not miracle workers.*

After Yang-chu had finished his song, the sons still failed to understand. They went and invited three doctors to examine their father.

The first doctor looked at the sick man and said, "You are ill because the yang and yin in your body are out of balance. You've weakened yourself by not eating or sleeping properly, having too much sex, and worrying about too many things. Given enough rest and care you should recover."

Yang-chu's friend said, "He's a doctor of average ability. Tell him to leave immediately."

The second physician examined the sick man and gave his prognosis. "Your illness is a result of a weak constitution due to insufficient nutrition in your mother's womb. Although there was sufficient milk to nourish you after you were born, the damage is done. Your illness did not come about overnight. It is something that has developed over a long period of time. There's not much that can be done about it now."

Yang-chu's friend said, "This man is a good doctor. Take him out for dinner."

The third doctor did not even examine Yang-chu's friend. He simply said, "Your illness is not caused by heaven, man, or evil spirits. Each person is endowed with life at birth and this course of life is not something that can be controlled or directed. Given the way things have turned out, even the best medication cannot help you."

Yang-chu's friend was very pleased with this doctor. He said, "Give him a rich gift. He is an ingenious doctor!"

Soon afterward, Yang-chu's friend recovered without any treatment.

Sometimes, if you value life too much, you cannot preserve it. If you get overattached to your health, you will get sick. However, if you do not care for yourself at all, you will lose your health and your life. Life and death, health and illness, benefit and harm come of themselves. Let things go according to their natural course. Don't try to make things happen and don't prevent them from happening.

*Yang-chu talks about destiny*

KING WEN'S TEACHER said to him, "In the natural world, things that are endowed with gifts from heaven are not necessarily more well-off than things that are not favored. In the same way, intelligent people are not necessarily more well-off than people who are not intelligent. Therefore, why try to estimate your chances of success based on your abilities and talents?"

Lao-tzu said to his student Wen-tzu, "We can't say that a person who is not gifted is hated by heaven. But on the other hand, who knows the will of heaven? Maybe by not giving him blessings, heaven is helping him instead."

Yang-chu's younger brother found that there were certain things he could not understand. So he asked his brother, "Suppose there are two men who are equal in age, intelligence, and manners. Let's say they even look alike and talk the same way. But one man is rich and the other poor; one of them enjoys a long and healthy life and the other dies young; one is respected by all and the other is despised. Can you tell me why one man is favored and the other is not, although they are both endowed with the same gifts at birth?"

Yang-chu said, "The ancients have much to say about these things. Let me explain them to you and maybe after you have considered their wisdom, you will not feel as confused."

"That two people with similar endowments at birth should end up with very different lives is a matter of the natural unfolding of events called destiny. Look at the muddy world, look at the crowds of people who push themselves to achieve, and you will realize they are neither happy nor contented. Do you need to do this, too, just because everyone else is doing it? If you don't want to push yourself, if you don't accept the social norms of success and achievement, who can stop you? From sunrise to sunset people rush around madly. Does this guarantee they will be more well-off than you are if you don't do the same thing? What will happen to you is not determined by effort, nor even by any innate abilities."

Seeing that his brother was still confused, Yang-chu continued, "If you accept



the natural order of things, you will not worry about whether your life is long or short. If you understand the laws of heaven and earth, you will not be concerned with conceptions of right or wrong. If you trust in yourself, then it doesn't matter whether conditions are safe or dangerous. If you are true to yourself, you will not be disturbed by things that happen around you. Gain or loss, praise or blame, approval or disapproval, happiness or sadness, anger or satisfaction cannot affect you.

“The Yellow Emperor once said that enlightened persons do not question why they are living or what they are doing. They are not affected by other people's actions and opinions. They do not go against the natural grain of things and do not do things that oppose their principles. Accepting the natural unfolding of events, they can go where they please and do what needs to be done. The thoughts and actions of others will have no affect on them.”

Like Yang-chu's brother, we often wonder why things happen the way they do. And when we see things happen contrary to our expectations, we are frustrated or disappointed. In our minds, two people with the same intelligence and appearance should have similar achievements in careers and social status. And if we do not succeed where others with the same abilities did, it feels good to find an excuse to get depressed and think that we are treated unfairly. However, if we can break free from this mode of thought and acknowledge that there are some things we simply cannot control, then there will be less disappointment, frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction in our lives.

*We cannot know people who are different from  
us*

THERE WERE FOUR PEOPLE who shared a house. They ate together, did the housework together, and even played together, but each one had a very different personality. One of them was studious and serious, one was reckless, one was carefree, and one was hot-tempered. Although they spent a lot of time together, they did things their own way and did not understand each other, for each one claimed to be more intelligent than everyone else.

There was another group of four people who also lived together and did many things together. They were also very different in their dispositions. One of them was glib and smooth-talking, one was blunt and honest, one was stubborn and rigid, and one was complacent and bending. Although they had lived together for a long time, they all went about doing things their own way and never bothered to learn about what the other people did, for each of them claimed to be more skillful than the others.

Yet another group of four found themselves as housemates who spent a lot of time together. They too were very different from each other. One of them was crafty, one was proud, one was silent, and one was argumentative. They also went about their own business and never listened to the other people, for they all believed they were more gifted than the others.

Four other people lived together. One of them was sneaky, one was fickle, one was daring, and one was timid. They also did things their own way and did not want to learn from each other. To the end of their lives they never understood each other and they all believed themselves more virtuous than the others.

There was one more group of four people with different characteristics who lived in the same house for a long time. One of them was outgoing and sociable, one was confident, one was authoritative, and one was a loner. Despite the time they'd spent together, they never knew each other, for each of them claimed to know the best way to take advantage of opportunities.

All of these people had different dispositions. On first glance, it may appear

they were snobbish because they did not want to understand others who had a different attitude. But, on the other hand, if they had tried, would they have succeeded? Or would they have acknowledged each other's differences politely, pretended they had understood each other, and then returned to doing things their own way?

Each individual is different, and each follows his or her own path in life. Why not be honest and accept our differences? Why pretend to understand when we do not? It is a rare occasion when two individuals can communicate directly with heart and mind, like Po-ya the lute player and his friend Chung Tzu-ch'i, or the master archer Fei-wei and his student Chi-ch'ang, and the friends Kuan-chung and Pao Shu-ya.

## *Success and failure*

THOSE WHO SUCCEED will often not know beforehand that they will succeed. Those who fail will often not know beforehand that they will fail. Therefore, why waste time and effort to anticipate success or failure when it will only cause anxiety and apprehension?

If we understand the nature of success and failure, we will not be sad if things go wrong or overjoyed when things go our way. Undisturbed by emotional swings, we can deal in a calm and composed manner with whatever comes.

Many things happen without our active intervention. When the momentum of events is too strong, the best thing we can do is get out of the way and not be swept up by it. Thus, knowing the role of destiny in success and failure, the wise ones know when to act and when to stop.

Someone who accepts the natural flow of events will not be aroused by what's happening around him. He will not respond in anger or joy, attraction or repulsion, fear or relaxation. On the other hand, someone who rejects the natural flow of events will always worry about success and failure, gain and loss, approval or rejection. Even if we blindfold him or put wax in his ears, he will still feel tension and anxiety.

Life and death are natural events. Riches and poverty are the product of the times. We only worry about whether our lives will be long or short, or whether we will be rich or poor, when we do not understand that events come and go of themselves and our worrying cannot change them.

Only those who accept the natural flow of events will not be concerned about life and death or anxious about praise or blame. Intelligent people will often want to calculate the likelihood of success and failure before they take action. However, their chances of succeeding are often not very different from those of people who do not think about the odds. Therefore, odds, likelihood, and timeliness are dependent on other events and their chances of happening, and so on in an endless chain. Things will turn out the way they would regardless of our predictions. Therefore, why try to predict and then be anxious about the accuracy

of our predictions?

When we do not anticipate success and failure, we will be prepared to accept any outcome. We will not be terribly overjoyed if things turn out the way we want, but we will not be miserable should things run amok.

*The king who was greedy about life and afraid of death*

THE KING OF CH'I was sightseeing on Ox Mountain. With him were his ministers and attendants. Looking down from the hill, the king saw his country before him—the wide expanse of fertile fields, the rolling hills of green and yellow, and the slow, meandering rivers. Suddenly, he was overcome with sadness and melancholy and sighed, "What a beautiful land! What a pity that I shall die one day and leave all this! If only death didn't exist, then I should have these mountains and rivers forever!" As he finished speaking, tears began to roll down his cheeks.

Two officials who attended the king also began to weep. To their master they said, "My lord, even we who only eat coarse grain and tough meat and travel in old carriages do not want to leave what we have. How much harder it is for a lord like you to part with your fortune!"

Just as everyone was getting more and more depressed, his chief minister, Yen-tzu, was quietly laughing to himself. The king turned to his advisor and said, "When I saw the beauty of the land before me and realized that I have to part with it one day, I was overcome with sadness and wept. All my subordinates shared my feelings and cried with me except you. Why are you laughing instead?"

Yen-tzu said, "If everyone lived forever, then the ancient kings would still be around, and they would be occupying their thrones. You, my lord, would be an undistinguished citizen plowing the field and worrying about whether you would have enough to eat. Given that, you'd probably want to die and not live forever. Today you are the king of a prosperous country, and yet you cry like a coward who is afraid of dying. Seeing a fool urged on by other fools, I cannot but laugh at this collective folly!"

When the king heard this he was ashamed. He apologized for his behavior and his inability to be an example to his subordinates.

When we are rich and famous and powerful, we do not want to die. On the

other hand, if we are miserable and suffering, we want to die and leave it all. But can joy or misery last forever? There is a saying, "All celebrations must end sometime." Any wish to live forever or die immediately is often a whim of the moment. How do we know that, although we are happy now, we may not be sad the next day, or sad now but may be happy soon? Given that good and ill, fortune and misfortune come in their own way, we should not cling to life or embrace death. Life and death will come of their own. Why be greedy about life and afraid of death?

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### *Death is not a loss*

THERE WAS A MAN whose only son died of a sudden illness. He did not mourn for his son, nor was he sad about it. His friends were curious about his behavior, so they asked him, “Your only son is dead. You should be heartbroken. Why do you act as if nothing had happened?”

The man replied, “Before my son came, I had no son. I was certainly not heartbroken back then. Now I have no son. Why should I be heartbroken now?”



## *Part Seven / Yang-chu*

## INTRODUCTION

Since we have no control over life and death, we should make the best of our time on earth. Why bend to social conventions, why be part of the struggle for material wealth when one day we will die, part with everything we have, and be forgotten? This is the gist of Yang-chu's teaching.

For Yang-chu, everything is replaceable, and therefore expendable; except the body. Thus, he counsels that the body should be preserved at all costs. Even if one could gain a kingdom by losing one hair, it is not worth it. If a kingdom is not worth a strand of hair, then fame and fortune are not worth the loss of physical health and mental well-being.

Names, titles, social status, and reputation are all empty. We should not sacrifice our precious time on earth for such empty pursuits. However, Yang-chu does not promote asceticism. To him, there is nothing wrong with being well-off and comfortable. We only destroy ourselves when we climb the social ladder at the expense of happiness.

*A name is nothing and titles are empty*

YANG-CHU WAS TRAVELING in the kingdom of Lu and stayed with his friend Meng.

One day Meng asked Yang-chu, "Why are people not satisfied with who they are? Why do they want social recognition?"

Yang-chu said matter-of-factly, "Social recognition can help them get rich."

"Why is it that after they get rich, they are still not satisfied?"

"After you have wealth, you'll want political power."

"But when they have political power, they're still not satisfied."

"Now they want to make sure things are in order when they die."

"When you die, you'll leave everything. What's the use of planning for things that happen afterward?"

"They worry about their grandchildren's future."

"How can a name and title affect the welfare of your descendants?"

Yang-chu explained, "People think if they leave a good reputation, then their descendants will be respected. However, most of the time, people who leave a good name are those who are tired in body and mind but have lived an honest life. Honesty and riches do not often go hand in hand. So the honest man who is socially recognized as a virtuous person is often poor. Similarly, a humble person may gain respect in his or her community but will not rise in rank and political power.

"So we have a paradox here. Honesty and humility will not get you power and rank although it may get you reputation. On the other hand, to be rich and powerful, you need to sacrifice some honesty and humility and maybe lose your reputation as a virtuous person. Many people spend their lives being stuck in this dilemma."

Meng thought he had understood Yang-chu, so he said, "I think I see what you mean. Look at Kuan-chung. When he was the chief minister of Ch'i, he was lecherous when the king was lecherous and extravagant when the king was extravagant. The minister and his lord were of the same heart and mind. So

Kuan-chung got along very well with the king and became the second most powerful man in the country. But today, his descendants are respected no more than the common citizen. On the other hand, another minister named T'ien-heng was humble when his king was arrogant, generous when his king was greedy. Minister and lord never got along well, but his popularity won the hearts of the people and they made him king. Now his descendants enjoy the prosperity of the kingdom of Ch'i.

"Therefore, the man who has power now may not leave a good name behind him, but the man who may be poor now may end up having a good reputation later."

Yang-chu said, "You haven't gotten my point. It is not that being humble and poor now will get you recognition later, nor that being powerful now will leave you a bad name. People think either you get power and social recognition now and give up your good name forever, or you suffer and sacrifice now and get a good name later. I say neither is worthwhile. The ancients say a name is nothing and titles are empty. Do you think the emperors Yao and Shun abdicated because they were virtuous? Their reputation actually went up after they lost the kingship. If there had been nothing to gain, I bet neither of them would have abdicated. Now do you think having reputation or a good name in history has to do with being virtuous? Not only is a name not worth pursuing, but it is actually meaningless.

"Take a look at the hermits Po-yi and Shu-ch'i. They refused to serve an enemy lord and starved to death in the mountains. These two became heroes and were regarded as men of integrity and virtue. However, they lost their lives and their lands, and their descendants became destitute. In this case, the reputation of these two men did nothing to help their children and grandchildren."

If you want a name and title, you must sacrifice some of your integrity and humility. If you want to be sincere and honest, you won't get much social recognition. Sometimes, having a name carries with it anxieties and burdens of responsibility. Thus, people who have power and social status are often not free to do what they want. Because everyone is watching them, they have to behave in a way that is expected of their reputation. One error and they will lose their hard-earned reputation. They are not exactly the happiest people.

On the other hand, someone with neither social status nor a reputation to uphold may be a freer and happier person. Why then work so hard to gain social recognition when it will only diminish your freedom and happiness?

*Life—temporarily staying in the world; death—temporarily leaving*

YANG-CHU SAID:

“If you live to be a hundred, it is considered a long life. However, only one in a thousand persons is that lucky. But if we take a person who has lived a hundred years and look at the time he has spent in his life, we will realize that a hundred years is not a long life. Out of these years, childhood and old age take up at least half the time. In addition, half the day he is asleep. Not to mention the hours during the day that he has idled away. What does that leave him? Moreover, if you take out the times when he is ill, sad, confused, suffering, and not feeling good, there isn’t much time left that he can enjoy or be free.

“Some people think they can find satisfaction in good food, fine clothes, lively music, and sexual pleasure. However, when they have all these things, they are not satisfied. They realize happiness is not simply having their material needs met. Thus, society has set up a system of rewards that go beyond material goods. These include titles, social recognition, status, and political power, all wrapped up in a package called self-fulfillment. Attracted by these prizes and goaded on by social pressure, people spend their short lives tiring body and mind to chase after these goals. Perhaps this gives them the feeling that they have achieved something in their lives, but in reality they have sacrificed a lot in life. They can no longer see, hear, act, feel, or think from their hearts. Everything they do is dictated by whether it can get them social gains. In the end, they’ve spent their lives following other people’s demands and never lived a life of their own. How different is this from the life of a slave or a prisoner?

“The ancients understood that life is only a temporary sojourn in this world, and death a temporary departure. In our short time here, we should listen to our own voices and follow our own hearts. Why not be free and live your own life? Why follow other people’s rules and live to please others? When something enjoyable comes your way, you should enjoy it fully. Don’t be imprisoned by name or title, for social conventions can lead you away from the natural order of

things. It doesn't matter whether you will be remembered in generations ahead, because you will not be there to see it.

“Why spend your life letting other people manipulate you just to get a name and reputation? Why not let your life be guided by your own heart and live without the burdens of fame and recognition?”

*In life there may be differences; in death  
everything is the same*

MYRIAD THINGS may be different in life, but in death they are the same.

Some people are born into rich families; others are born poor. Some are born intelligent; others are born stupid. Some are born into nobility; others are born as common citizens. While they live, they are different. But when they die, everyone is just a pile of bones and rotting flesh.

Whether we live or die, are intelligent or stupid, is not something we can control. We cannot choose to be born, nor can we choose not to rot when we die. We are not responsible for our intelligence or stupidity, nor do we have any say in what kind of environment we are born into. All these things come of themselves and are matters of destiny. Thus, in life we are different because of different destinies.

There is, however, one thing we all have in common: death. Some may live to be a hundred; others may die after ten years of life. But regardless of how long you live, you must die. Virtuous people die; crooks die. When alive, the virtuous may be respected, but in death they are a pile of dry bones. Similarly, the wicked may be abhorred in life, but in death they are also a pile of bones. Famous people are a pile of bones after death; unknown people are a pile of bones after death. Differences are seen or remembered at most for a hundred years, but after that, one pile of bones is just the same as another.

Given the shortness and transitory nature of life, we should make the best use of it. Enjoy it while you can. Why worry about whether you will leave a good name when all that will be left of you is a pile of dry bones?

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*Riches can injure you, but poverty can also hurt you*

THERE WAS A POOR MAN who eventually starved to death because of poverty. There was a wealthy man who injured his body and tired his mind because he pushed himself too hard trying to get richer.

Thus, riches can injure you, but poverty can also hurt you. What is the best way, then, to live?

A good life is a contented life with sufficient means and adequate enjoyment. If you're too rich, you will be burdened by your wealth, because with great wealth come the complexities of management, and with management comes the anxiety over gain and loss. On the other hand, if you are too poor, you will not get enough to eat or have warm clothing or leisure time. Thus, you toil if you are too rich, and you toil if you are too poor. These are two extremes we should avoid.

If you don't have enough to eat, work on getting enough to eat. If you can't keep warm in winter, work on getting sufficient clothing. If you don't have time to enjoy yourself, work toward getting leisure time. But when you have enough, you should stop. If you continue to work to get gourmet foods, a big wardrobe, and more vacations, you'll end up not having the time to enjoy them, because you will always be working on getting the money to do these things.



## *Taking care of yourself*

YEN-TZU ASKED KUAN-CHUNG what the ancients meant by “cultivating life.”

Kuan-chung replied, “Cultivating life is taking care of yourself. It means living freely and not putting constraints on yourself.”

“Can you elaborate on this?”

“Let your eyes see what they see, not what others want you to see. Let your ears hear what they naturally hear, not what others want you to hear. Let your mouth speak your mind freely and not be constrained by other people’s approval or disapproval. Let your mind think what it wants to think and not let other people’s demands dictate your thoughts. If your senses and your mind are not allowed to do what they want to do naturally, you are denying them their rights. When you cannot think, sense, feel, or act freely, then your body and mind are injured. Break these oppressions, and you will cultivate life. When you can cultivate life, then you can wait peacefully for death. Being able to escape these oppressions for one day is better than to live a hundred years being imprisoned by them.”

Kuan-chung then said to Yen-tzu, “Now that I’ve talked about cultivating life, what can you tell me about taking care of death?”

Yen-tzu said, “As far as I am concerned, there’s not much to taking care of death. It comes when it comes.”

When Kuan-chung pressed him further, Yen-tzu said, “When I’m dead I won’t know anything. Therefore, it doesn’t really matter whether you throw me into the sea, leave me in the open, roll me into a ditch, or bury me in a grave. I wouldn’t know if you dressed me up in expensive burial clothes or wrapped me in burlap sacks. Why worry about what happens after you die?”

Kuan-chung then turned to his friend Pao Shu-ya and said, “Between Yen-tzu and myself, we’ve said all there is to say about the way to live and the way to die.”

When you live, be contented and know what’s enough. When you die, there’s no need for expensive caskets and elaborate funerals. Thus, live a satisfied life

and die a simple death.

### *A madman or an enlightened man?*

TUAN-MU SHU WAS an extremely wealthy man. He was the descendant of Tzu-kung, who was a student of Confucius and a very successful businessman. Tuan-mu Shu inherited a large fortune from his ancestors and was not interested in working. He enjoyed the good life and followed wherever his fancy led him.

He had a large mansion built of the finest materials and decorated by the most skillful artisans. He ate the best foods and wore clothes of the highest quality. He traveled in comfortable carriages and was always accompanied by beautiful courtesans.

Tuan-mu Shu went after anything that excited his senses, aroused his curiosity, and stimulated his mind. He collected rare artifacts and treasures from foreign countries. He traveled to exotic places. He was entertained by the best musicians and dancers of the time. He would not deny himself anything. He was wealthy and extravagant and was envied by kings and nobles alike.

Unlike most wealthy people, however, Tuan-mu Shu was never tightfisted with his money. He was generous and spent it freely on others as well as on himself. He threw huge parties regularly and invited hundreds of people to enjoy the best food and the finest entertainment. He also shared his wealth with relatives, friends, neighbors, and even people whom he didn't know. His generosity was so great that not a needy person was found in the town where he lived nor in the neighboring villages.

When Tuan-mu Shu was sixty years old and his health was beginning to fail, he gave away all his possessions, leaving nothing for his children and grandchildren. Within a year, the rich man had become poor and could not even afford to call a doctor when he was ill. When he died, his children had no money to bury him. Fortunately for his descendants, the people who had benefited from Tuan-mu Shu's generosity collected funds, gave him a decent burial, and returned some of the wealth to the family.

When a prominent scholar heard about this, he said, "Tuan-mu Shu is a madman. Tzu-kung would have rolled over in his grave if he knew about this."

Another philosopher commented, "Tuan-mu Shu is an enlightened man. He even surpasses his ancestor Tzu-kung."

Is Tuan-mu Shu a madman or an enlightened man? If you judge him by social norms, then it would appear that Tuan-mu Shu was indeed crazy. He abandoned his family, did not care for the welfare of his descendants, and squandered his wealth. But then again, Tuan-mu Shu was sincere in everything he did. There was no pretense, no scheming, no ulterior motive in his actions. He followed his heart and was not constrained by social conventions. He enjoyed himself freely, he *gave freely*, and he never did anything that went against his nature.

*What damages health more—unrestricted  
pleasure or obsessive hard work?*

TZU-CH'AN, THE CHIEF MINISTER of the kingdom of Cheng, had two brothers. While he spent his energy on strengthening the country and putting down crime and disorder, his two brothers indulged in everything that satisfied their senses.

One of the brothers had a brewery and a large warehouse in the back of his mansion where he stored thousands of jars of wine. Even a block away one could smell the reek of fermenting yeast. He drank heavily, and, when drunk, he was oblivious to everything around him. He couldn't care if there was peace or war or if his house was looted. He couldn't recognize friends and relatives, and he lost all concern for life or death.

The other brother had a dozen rooms in the house where he kept a group of beautiful young women. Often he would visit his harem and make love all night and would not be satisfied when the morning came. When he was aroused sexually, he would spend months with the women, never even bothering to come out to meet friends and relatives or take care of the family business. When he reveled in his sexual pleasures, he was oblivious to the world outside. It didn't matter to him whether the country was at war or peace or whether his house was vandalized or robbed.

Tzu-ch'an was very concerned about his brothers' lifestyles. So he went to talk to Teng-hsi, a fellow statesman who, although sarcastic and snide at times, was known for his keen observations and problem-solving ability.

Tzu-ch'an said, "I'm worried about my two brothers. It is said that a man is not worthy to govern a state if he cannot set his family in order. As you can see, the new laws and reforms are working very well now, but my family matters are a mess. Can you suggest anything that would get my two irresponsible brothers to behave more properly?"

Teng-hsi replied, "I've noticed their behaviors too, and I've wondered when you were going to do something about it. Here's what I would suggest. Find a good opportunity to tell them about the need to put their lives in order. Tell them

what they're doing is damaging their health. Maybe this will convince them to change their lifestyles."

One day Tzu-ch'an found his brothers together. He took this opportunity to talk to them about their lives.

"Heaven made us a cut above animals in dignity and intelligence. Therefore, it is our duty to live up to these expectations and behave in a manner befitting our position in society. If you only live to satisfy your senses, you are no more than animals. Moreover, wine and sex can damage your health, and one day you will find yourself weak and wasted away by your pleasures. Stop harming yourselves, become responsible citizens, and I shall give you a position in the government."

Tzu-ch'an's brothers said, "We know that wine and sex damage health. But we also know that life is short, and we want to enjoy whatever we can now. You, on the other hand, suppress what you want to do in order to maintain your rank and power. You belabor your body and mind day and night. Does that not damage your health, age you, and make you weak and wasted?"

"You are proud of your achievements and you want us to conform to your beliefs. You want to entice us with titles and political power, but we know that such things only bring burden and trouble.

"You say our lifestyles are embarrassing and you want to reform us. Let us tell you something, too. You may be the chief minister, and the country may look like it's in order. But look at yourself closely. You are tired and haggard. You have damaged your body and mind because you are anxious about keeping the country in order. In order to maintain your reputation, you have damaged your heart by suppressing your natural inclinations. You have kept law and order, but you have not won people's hearts. People accept your rule because they are afraid of you, not because they respect you. We, on the other hand, may be wild and unruly, but we are true to ourselves. We have never put up a front to gain respect. We have never been involved in dirty politics or harmed other people with treachery and intrigue. Can you say this about yourself? If you can't, then it's not we who should take your advice, but you who should take ours!"

Tzu-ch'an did not know what to say. Later he saw Teng-hsi and related the whole incident to him. Teng-hsi said, "You have been living with enlightened men and didn't even know it."

As history tells us, Tzu-ch'an had to kill Teng-hsi to silence his disruptive criticisms. Cheng became a powerful state for a while, but after Tzu-ch'an's death it weakened and was eventually conquered by a more powerful neighbor. Tzu-ch'an himself was not given a very good image by later historians, but nothing was heard concerning the two brothers, for they were neither praised nor

damned by history.

*Everyone must die sometime*

SOMEONE ASKED YANG-CHU, "What do you think of people who pray for immortality?"

Yang-chu replied, "Everyone must die sometime. Praying won't help."

"How about asking for a long life, then?"

"Life and death have their own course. It's not something we can ask for, hope for, or control. Even if you take all the necessary precautions to preserve your life, it is not guaranteed that you'll keep it. Besides, joy and sorrow, gain and loss, war and peace, good government and bad repeat themselves throughout history. Why live a hundred years to see the same things come and go?"

"If life is such a bad experience, why not kill yourself and end it early?"

"That's not the way to go either. When you live, you should accept life and let it run its course. When you die, you should accept death and go to it peacefully. Life and death come by themselves. We should let them run their course and not try to speed or delay them."



*Would you sacrifice a strand of hair to benefit the world?*

YANG-CHU SAID, "The sage Po-ch'eng-kao-tzu would not sacrifice his body and mind to benefit the world, so he became a hermit and lived a life of peace and contentment. Yü the king sacrificed everything to help the world. He got everyone's respect but became a cripple for the rest of his life. The ancients say if people did not sacrifice a single strand of their hair to save the world, then the world would be a less complicated place."

Someone then asked Yang-chu, "If plucking a strand of hair from your body could help the world, would you do it?"

Yang-chu said, "The world cannot be helped by a piece of my hair."

"But suppose it could. Would you do it?"

Yang-chu did not answer.

Sometime later, this inquirer met one of Yang-chu's friends and brought up the matter.

Yang-chu's friend said, "You don't understand his point. Let me ask you this. Would you cut a piece of flesh from your body if by doing it you would get ten thousand pieces of gold?"

"I think I would."

"However, if you could gain a kingdom by losing an arm, would you do it?"

The inquirer was silent.

Yang-chu's friend then said, "A strand of hair is nothing compared to a piece of flesh, and a piece of flesh is negligible compared to a limb. However, many pieces of hair make up your scalp, and many pieces of flesh make up a limb. When do you consider enough hairs a scalp and when do you consider enough pieces of flesh an arm? Every part of your body is as important as any other. Why think that some parts are dispensable?"

The inquirer said, "I can't argue with you on that. If we took the matter to Lao-tzu and Wen-tzu, they would probably say you are right. However, if we took the issue to Mo-tzu or Yü, they would agree with me."

It is not that the selfless Confucianist would sacrifice himself for the greater benefit of humanity while the selfish Taoist would not. Yang-chu is often misunderstood on this point. What Yang-chu is saying is that we often think we can change the course of things by sacrificing one thing or the other. In thinking that our efforts can make a difference, we may have messed things up rather than helped. If we weren't so eager to be heroic and sacrifice ourselves "to make things better," things could be left alone to run their course, and maybe there would be fewer problems in the world.

*Ruling a country is like tending a flock of sheep*

YANG-CHU SAID to the king of Liang, "Ruling a country is quite straightforward. It's as easy as flipping things on the palm of your hand."

The king said, "You can't even manage your family affairs or clear your garden of weeds. How can you advise me on ruling my country?"

Yang-chu was not daunted. He said, "Have you seen a shepherd at work? He can control several hundred sheep by getting a child to prod them gently from behind with a bamboo stick. The entire flock will move in the direction he wants them to go. On the other hand, if you try to lead each sheep, you will not be able to get the flock moving.

"I have also heard that fish that can swallow a boat do not swim in small rivers, and high-flying birds do not land on small ponds. Why? It is because only wide-open spaces can match the stature and power of these animals. Similarly, stately music is not appropriate for small events, and a small knife cannot skin a large animal. Thus, those who set out to rule a country do not concern themselves with trivial tasks, and those who want to succeed in great enterprises do not waste their time on small achievements."

*Things are not as permanent as we think they are*

THINGS THAT HAPPENED in the ancient times are now forgotten. Things that happened ten thousand years ago are more legend than fact. Events that occurred five thousand years ago are more of a dream than reality. We may still retain a bit of memory of what happened a thousand years ago, but most of the events are forgotten. In fact, it is a great accomplishment to remember things that happened a hundred years ago. Even eyewitnesses have a hard time recalling what they saw fifty years ago.

Much has gone on between the ancient times and the present. Sages and tyrants have come and gone. Intelligent people, foolish people, kind people, cruel people, good people, bad people have all made brief appearances in history and then disappeared. We don't know who they were or what they did, let alone what position and rank they occupied in society. Life is short. Why injure yourself to achieve things like name and reputation when you know that in fifty years, you'll be no different from anyone else? Why sacrifice your happiness and peace of mind to go after something ephemeral and transitory?

Of all creatures, humans are said to be the most intelligent. However, we are plagued by happiness, anger, sadness, and fear. We do not have sharp teeth or claws to hunt down prey. We do not have fur or feathers to keep ourselves warm. We cannot run fast to escape predators, and our skin is not tough enough to protect us if we are attacked. We must rely on other sources to provide us with shelter, clothing, food, and weapons. Our intelligence does not make us privileged. Each species is endowed with a unique ability. We have intelligence, birds have feathers, and fish have gills. To use intelligence to fulfill our basic needs and comfort is appropriate; to use it to harm others is to go against the natural order of things. And intelligence is transitory. Like skin, bones, and flesh, it disappears when we die.

Our time on earth is short. We do not own our lives. We come into existence when yin and yang energies interact, and we disappear when they separate.

Thus, should we find ourselves alive in this world, we should let this life run its course. Do not be attached to it, but do not throw it away. Make the best use of your time now. If this body of flesh and blood is impermanent, how much more are nontangible things like name, title, and reputation?

## *Longevity, fame, social status, and wealth*

PEOPLE WORK THEMSELVES to exhaustion for four things—longevity, fame, social status, and wealth. However, they do not know that these four things only bring problems and anxiety. When you have longevity, you'll be afraid that evil spirits or uncontrollable circumstances will take it away. When you have fame, you'll be anxious that your reputation will be damaged by people jealous of you. When you have social status, you'll be worried that a shift in politics will take it away. When you have wealth, you'll be afraid that you may be robbed.

Only people who see through the illusions of longevity, fame, social status, and wealth are not burdened by anxiety and fear. If there is nothing at stake, then there is nothing to worry about. If you don't crave longevity, then you won't be afraid to die. If you don't care for fame, then you won't be concerned with how you present yourself to others. If you are not interested in social status, then you won't be bothered by what other people think of you. If you are not possessive about money, then you won't tire body and mind to accumulate it. You will have no need to envy others, and you can follow your own principles and be true to yourself.

The ancients say, "If there were no such things as marriage or political power, then people's desires would be cut in half. If there were no need to eat or be clothed, then rulers and governments would be superfluous." Thus, the wise ones of old advised us that craving power, status, wealth, and longevity will only generate problems. If people are content with living a simple but comfortable life, there will be no competition. When there is no competition, things can be allowed to run their natural course.

There is an old saying, "Make a farmer sit all day and you'll drive him crazy." It is natural for a farmer to tend the fields and work from sunrise to sunset. To be tired after a day's work, to eat a simple and big meal, and to sleep soundly at night are things he is accustomed to. If you put him on a featherbed, give him gourmet foods that don't fill him up, and make him sit around all day, it would be equivalent to killing him.

There was a story about a farmer who could not afford a fur coat. In winter he felt chilly and cold, but when spring came and the sun shone on his neck and arms, he felt it was bliss. So he went to his friends and said, "No one knows how great it feels to have the sun warming your back. I shall present this secret to the king. He'll be sure to reward me well for my discovery." When his neighbors heard this they laughed at him and said, "You're just like that man who presented broadbeans, potatoes, and roots to the dignitaries, thinking they would enjoy them as delicacies. But when the rich people tasted these foods, their stomachs were upset and they punished the farmer for his mean trick."

Those who see fame, longevity, status, and wealth as their goal in life will never experience simple happiness and contentment. And those who are happy and carefree will not want to exchange their freedom for the problems associated with social success.

The ancients say, "Better to eat a simple meal than to receive food from a ruler's plate." Being conscientious and loyal does not necessarily protect you from treachery, and too many responsibilities can harm body and mind. Therefore, the best rulers govern without asking subjects to be loyal or virtuous, and the best government is one that does not promote reward, whether it be wealth, status, or power. When there is no system of reward, there will be no competition. When there is no competition, there will be no treachery. When there is no treachery, people can be true to themselves.

The ancients also say, "If you can dispense with reputation, then you are free from care. Reputation is only a visitor, but reality is here to stay."

In today's world, people place too much importance on fame, wealth, longevity, and reputation at the expense of their happiness. Of course, you can't enjoy life if you don't have some wealth or longevity. However, to push yourself to exhaustion going after these goals and not knowing when to stop is to rob yourself of the time you have in this world.

## *Part Eight / Explaining Coincidences*



## INTRODUCTION

When two things occur successively we call them cause and effect if we believe one event made the other one happen. If we think one event is the response to the other, we call it a reaction. If we feel that the two incidents are not related, we call it a mere coincidence. If we think someone deserved what happened, we call it retribution or reward, depending on whether the event was negative or positive for the recipient. If we cannot find a reason for the two events' occurring simultaneously or in close proximity, we call it an accident. Therefore, how we explain coincidences depends on how we see the world. Is everything connected, so that events create resonances like ripples across a net? Or do things merely co-occur and we give meaning to these co-occurrences based on our belief system? Lieh-tzu's answer: It's all in how you think.

## *Action and reaction*

LIEH-TZU WAS STUDYING with his teacher Hu-tzu.

“Before you understand what it means to act, you need to know what it means to react,” said Hu-tzu.

“Can you tell me more about this?”

“Turn around and look at your shadow.”

Lieh-tzu turned around and looked at his shadow. When he was bent, the shadow was bent. When he straightened up, his shadow straightened. Lieh-tzu found that his shadow had no control over its movement and simply reacted to what he did. It was only then that Lieh-tzu realized we are also like shadows, reacting to events in the world. We are not the movers of events; we can only respond to situations. Whether we should be active or passive does not depend on what we want to do, but what the situation calls for.

WEN-TZU SAID to Lieh-tzu, “If you are good to others, others will be good to you. If you harm others, you will eventually be harmed. Your actions produce reactions that follow you like shadows. Just as a tall person’s shadow is tall and a short person’s shadow is short, ugly words will produce ugly echoes, and good intentions will produce good reactions. For every action there is a reaction, and for every cause there is an effect.

“If someone loves you, you are likely to love him; if someone hates you, you are likely to hate him. This is the typical way we react. Therefore, the sage is careful about his own actions because he knows others will react to them, and by examining his own actions he can predict what other people will do. The sage also knows that as he can predict the actions of others, so can others predict his. Therefore, by hiding his actions, he becomes unpredictable.”

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### *Why do people follow the path of the Tao?*

SOMEONE ONCE ASKED Lieh-tzu, “Why do people follow the path of the Tao? Does it make them rich? But then again, we can get rich by winning the lottery. So why follow the Tao?”

Lieh-tzu said, “Tyrants and dictators fell because they placed too much importance on riches and power. If you spend your life pushing, shoving, and grabbing, then you are no better than wild animals. How can you gain the respect of others if you act like a beast?”

### *Lieh-tzu learns archery*

LIEH-TZU WAS LEARNING archery and finally managed to hit the target.

He went to Wen-tzu and said, "Do you have any suggestion as to how I can improve?"

Wen-tzu replied, "Do you know why you could hit the target that time?"

"I don't know."

"That's not good enough. Go back and practice some more."

After three years Lieh-tzu visited Wen-tzu again.

Wen-tzu said, "Now do you know why you are able to hit the target?"

"I do."

"That's good. Remember what you've learned and don't let your practice go to waste. By the way, the principles of learning archery apply to everything else. If you don't understand what you are doing, you will not be able to perform reliably. Therefore, in learning anything, whether it is governing the country or managing your life, you must understand the principles."

### *Choosing the right person for the job*

LIEH-TZU SAID, “People who are in the prime of their vitality are often proud of their vigor. Those who are physically strong are eager to show off their prowess and strength. You cannot discuss the Tao with them because they will not appreciate it. Similarly, it is useless to talk about the Tao with those who are young and immature. They will not listen, and even if they listen they are not emotionally steady enough to hold on to it.

“Therefore, the resourceful person likes to give responsibility to people who are older and more mature. Ideally, you should look for someone who has a clear direction in life, someone who still has physical strength, but who also has staying power and emotional stability. Thus, the key to management lies not in your own talent but in your ability to choose the right people.”

*Can we compete with nature?*

THERE WAS A MAN who spent three years sculpting a piece of jade into a leaf. He presented his masterpiece to a prince who was very impressed by it and became his patron.

The leaf looked so real that if you placed it among real leaves you could not tell the difference. Everyone remarked that it was a very beautiful piece of art.

However, when Lieh-tzu heard about this he quipped, “If nature took three years to make a leaf, then we’d be in trouble.”

Thus, the sage knows that no matter how we try to imitate the works of nature, nature still does a better job.

*Someone's words can make or break you*

WHEN LIEH-TZU was living in Cheng, he was poor and starving. A friend saw his condition and spoke to the chief minister, "Lieh-tzu is a sage who has attained the Tao. He is now living in your country poor and unrecognized. Why don't you send him a gift to show you appreciate an enlightened man when you see one?"

The chief minister immediately sent a gift of grain to Lieh-tzu.

When the minister's messenger arrived with the gift, Lieh-tzu went to the door, bowed twice to the honored guest, and politely refused the gift.

His wife was outraged with Lieh-tzu's behavior and scolded him, "Wives and children of other sages live comfortably and we are starving. Now that we've finally gotten some food from the minister, why did you refuse it? How can you do this to us?"

Lieh-tzu smiled and said to his wife, "Let me tell you why I refused the gift. If I am honored because of another person's opinion, then I can also be dismissed because of someone's opinion. People's words can make you but they can also break you. That's why I am scared of receiving a gift based on someone's opinion of me. We may not be rich, but it is safer this way."

Not long afterward, the popularity of the chief minister fell. The king, swayed by public opinion, had him executed.

*Being at the right place at the right time*

SHIH OF THE COUNTRY of Lu had two talented sons. One son excelled in scholarship and the other excelled in the military arts. After discussing their future with them, he sent the scholar to the king of Ch'i and the military genius to the king of Ch'u.

The king of Ch'i was very impressed with the young man's scholarship and made him tutor to the crown prince.

The king of Ch'u was very pleased with the other brother's abilities and made him a general.

Both young men received rich lands and a large salary, and the Shih family rose in fortune and power.

Meng, who was a longtime neighbor of the Shih family, saw and envied the success of Shih's sons. He decided to ask the rich man for advice on how his own sons might find their fortunes. Meng also had two sons, one talented in scholarship and the other in warfare.

Shih was very candid and told Meng how his own sons became rich and powerful. Meng went home and counseled his two sons to offer their skills to the lords of two feudal kingdoms.

The learned son went to the king of Ch'in and presented a proposal of how to govern a country with kindness and humility. The ruler of Ch'in was about to invade the neighboring states that were rich and fertile. He considered the scholar's proposal a mockery and an insult to his policy and said angrily, "Here in Ch'in the land is poor and mountainous. If we don't invade the smaller but richer states to get their resources, we'll be conquered by powerful states such as Ch'i. If I follow your proposal, our country will be destroyed. What do you take me for, a fool?" The king had the scholar castrated before he sent him away.

Meng's other son went to the king of Wei and presented a proposal of military action. The king listened to the plans and said, "My country is small and weak. If I listen to your advice and invade the neighboring states, that will be the end of Wei. Looking at the current situation, we can only hope to survive by forging



alliances with the more powerful states. I need the services of a diplomat, not a warrior. I cannot use you, but I am afraid you will offer your military skills to the other states.” So the king ordered his guards to cut off the young man’s legs before he sent him away.

When Meng saw his sons return, one crippled and the other castrated, he was shocked and angry. Thinking that Shih had played a mean trick on him and had deliberately given him bad advice, he stormed into Shih’s house and demanded an explanation.

When Shih heard what had happened to Meng’s sons he sighed and said, “Heroes and paupers are made by the times. My sons were at the right place at the right time and yours were at the wrong place at the wrong time. I merely told you what my sons did. You thought it was a formula for success and applied it without thinking. Sometimes, things that work today may not work tomorrow, and strategies that are good for one situation may not work in another. For something to work, the political, social, and economical climate must be right. You can call it destiny or fate or the appropriateness of the times. The wise man understands that being at the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time is something we cannot control. Therefore, he accepts what befalls him and tries to cope with the consequence rather than fight it.”

When Meng heard this, his anger died down and he realized he must find ways to live with his misfortune. To Shih, he said, “I understand now. You need not speak any more.”

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*If I can step on someone, someone else can step on me*

THE KING OF CHIN called his ministers together and told them he intended to invade the neighboring country of Wei. When the chief minister heard the king's plans, he threw his head back and laughed.

The king was shocked and asked for an explanation. The chief minister said, "There was a man from my neighborhood who met a beautiful woman while he and his wife were on their way to visit his in-laws. The man lusted after the woman and secretly went to meet her. On coming home after his night out, he found his wife in bed with another man. When I heard this, I couldn't help laughing."

The king of Chin got the point and did not entertain further ideas about going after another country's territory.

*To solve a problem, you need to remove the cause, not the symptom*

THERE WAS A LOT of crime in the state of Chin. The government tried different strategies to apprehend the robbers, but all failed. One day, as the ruler of Chin was fretting over the worsening situation, an officer told him there was a man who could recognize criminal types by looking for certain features in the eyes and eyebrows.

The king of Chin summoned this man and set him to hunt down the criminals in the country. The man lived up to his reputation, and in no time a large number of robbers were captured and imprisoned. The king was very happy with these results and related them to Wen-tzu. "I have found a person who can help me apprehend all the robbers in the country. It looks like our crime problem is solved."

Wen-tzu said, "You cannot stop crime by relying on techniques to hunt down criminals. If you apprehend a hundred robbers today, there will be another hundred tomorrow, because you are dealing with the symptom, not the cause. Anyhow, I am willing to bet that this fellow whom you are using to hunt criminals will not live long."

Not too long afterward, alarmed by the rate at which they were being caught, several gangs of robbers banded together and murdered the criminal hunter.

The king was both startled and distressed by this news and went to Wen-tzu for advice.

"It is as you have predicted," said the king. "Now how are we going to catch these robbers?"

Wen-tzu said, "The ancient sages said those who have a talent in revealing fish in deep pools are unlucky, and those who are skillful in uncovering secrets will not live long. The best way to deal with crime is not to hunt down criminals but to educate the public. Employ upright and honorable people. Instill a sense of virtue and honesty in your subjects. In due time, as people come to respect the virtues, the crime rate will drop naturally."

The king took Wen-tzu's advice this time and set up a program of education throughout the country. And as Wen-tzu had predicted, when the people began to value honesty and integrity, the crime rate dropped. When the few diehard criminals found they could not get sympathy and support from the citizens, they fled Chin and went to another state.

### *Trust and confidence*

CONFUCIUS WAS TRAVELING from the state of Wei back to his home country of Lu when he stopped to rest by a river. Looking downstream, he saw the waters flow swiftly along the banks and tumble down a great height in a spectacular waterfall.

Suddenly, he saw a man on the opposite bank who was about to dive into the river. He called to the man urgently and said, “The waters are very fast and deep. Even the fish and turtles are afraid to go near this part of the river. If you try to swim across, you’ll be drowned.”

The man acted as if he had not heard a word Confucius said. He jumped into the river and swam leisurely across. Confucius was amazed that the man could accomplish such a feat. As the man stepped onto the shore, Confucius went over to him and said, “I have never seen anyone with such skill in swimming. How were you able to keep yourself from being swept away by the rapids?”

The man replied, “When I am in the water, I trust the waters and I have confidence in myself. Therefore, no matter how fast the waters are, I am not afraid. With trust and confidence, I have become friends with the river. Therefore, I can swim across it and it will not harm me.”

Confucius then turned to his students and said, “Remember these words well. If by trust and confidence you can befriend a river, how much more can they help you to befriend people?”

*The best way to keep a secret is not to talk*

A NOBLEMAN who was plotting to kill two of his rivals wanted to see if people saw his motives. He went to Confucius and said, “Will someone guess your secrets if you leave clues?”

Confucius did not answer.

“Suppose you throw a stone into the river. Will someone notice it?”

“A good diver would”

“If you mix the waters of two rivers together, will someone be able to tell them apart?”

“I’ve heard there are some people who have this ability.”

“In this case, can there be no secrets?”

Confucius said, “Why not? Someone who listens and understands well will be able to keep a secret well. This is because you don’t have to talk a lot to get him to understand your point. The less you talk, the less you’ll reveal. Thus, the best way to keep a secret is not to talk, and the best way to get things done is not to do them.”

The nobleman did not quite understand what Confucius meant. In the end his plans of treachery and murder were discovered, and he himself was killed.

*Those who succeed are not excited about success; those who know do not display their knowledge*

THE PRINCE OF CH'U ordered his generals to attack a rival state. A few days later, messengers returned with the news that the commanders were victorious and took two major cities.

The prince was eating his dinner when the couriers arrived. He listened to the report and then looked worried. His subordinates were confused by their lord's behavior and asked, "Our generals took two cities in one day. This is great news, my lord. Why aren't you excited?"

The prince replied, "In the old days it was said that a great flood will not last more than three days. It was also said that a strong wind will not last till morning, and a heavy rain cannot fall all day. What this means is that big events won't last long, and sudden and large achievements are not permanent. I'm afraid that our early success may not hold, and if we get excited over it, we will become negligent, and eventually we'll be defeated."

When Confucius heard this, he said, "With a ruler like that, the state of Ch'u will become very powerful. The prince is a man who is not carried away by success. Therefore, he will be calm and steady regardless of the circumstances. It is easy to succeed and be excited by it, but it is difficult to treat success as a normal, everyday affair and not let it disrupt your plans. The state of Ch'u will be around for a long time.

"When a ruler is proud of success, you can be sure the country will weaken. This was what happened to the states of Ch'i, Wu and Yeh. Their kings did not understand that short-range achievements do not guarantee long-term success."

It was said that Confucius had the strength to lift an iron gate but he never displayed his strength. When Mo-tzu and a famous military strategist played a war game on a chess board, Mo-tzu won easily. And yet, Mo-tzu was never known as an expert in the military arts.

Therefore, those who succeed do not revel in their success, and those who know do not display their knowledge.



*Fortune and misfortune*

IN THE COUNTRY of Sung there lived a family who were known for their generosity and kindness. For three generations, all the members of the family had helped the poor and needy, but one day a strange thing happened in the household—their black cow gave birth to a white calf. The head of the family was curious about what the omen meant, so he sent his son to consult with Confucius.

Confucius said, “This is a very good omen for your family. You should sacrifice the calf and thank the lords of heaven.”

The family did as Confucius suggested.

A year later, the head of the family suddenly became blind in one eye, and about the same time, their black cow gave birth to a white calf. Again the father told his son to ask Confucius the meaning of this. His son said, “Last time Confucius told us the white calf was a good omen. You’ve lost an eye; what’s so good about that? I don’t think we should consult with Confucius anymore.”

His father said, “The wisdom of the sages is beyond our understanding. Besides, it is often not apparent whether something is good or bad on first examination. Go and ask Confucius again.”

Reluctantly, the son went to Confucius and described the situation. Confucius said, “This is a very good omen. Go home and tell your father to give thanks for his good fortune.”

A year later, for no apparent reason, the son lost his sight in both eyes.

Not long after that, the country of Sung was attacked by the powerful state of Ch’u. All able-bodied males were conscripted into the army. Eventually, the people of Sung were able to hold off the invaders, but at a cost of many lives. The father and his blind son escaped the conscription only because they were disabled.

After the war was over and the neighbors were weeping over lost husbands and sons, the blind boy realized that his misfortune was actually good fortune. Not long afterward, both father and son suddenly recovered their sight.

Something that appears as misfortune now may turn out to be beneficial later, and vice versa. If we can look at fortune and misfortune in this way, we will be less miserable when misfortune hits us. We will also be less excited when we are fortunate, and therefore we will be less depressed when fortune goes away.

### *A matter of luck*

THERE WAS a wandering acrobat who offered to perform before the king of Sung. "Show me what you can do," said the king.

The acrobat tied his legs to a pair of stilts taller than two men, stood up on them, and ran back and forth. His footwork was so nimble and his balance so precise that the stilts appeared as if they were extensions of his legs. Then he took seven swords and, balancing on the stilts again, juggled the seven weapons, keeping five of them spinning in the air all the time.

The king was impressed by the acrobat's skill. He gave the performer a handsome gift of silks and gold.

Another wandering acrobat heard about this and decided he would try to get a reward by performing before the king. So he went to the palace, offered to entertain the king, and proceeded to demonstrate his skill on the trapeze. After the performance the king scowled and said, "The other day an entertainer came to show off his tricks, and being in a good mood I sent him off with some gifts. You must have heard that you can make fast money by showing off yours. Well, I am not in the mood for being entertained today."

Without further discussion, the king had the acrobat punished and imprisoned. Luckily for the entertainer, the king's mood changed after a few days and the performer was released.

Luck brought the first acrobat fortune, and lack of luck brought the second one misfortune, but in the end it was luck that saved him. Whether we attribute luck to an act of some god or nature, or to the whims of a powerful man, it plays a large part in our destiny. And if we can acknowledge its role, we will not be as frustrated or angered if we are "unlucky" or excited and proud when we are "lucky."

*Seeing beyond appearances*

PO-LO WAS A HORSE BREEDER who was known for his uncanny skill in recognizing exceptional horses. He had served his king for a long time and was responsible for breeding the best horses in the country.

Now that Po-lo was getting old and weak, the king was worried that the horse breeder would leave no successor when he died. So he approached Po-lo and said, "You are advanced in years, but I can't retire you to live a comfortable life because I can't find anyone who possesses your skill in recognizing exceptional horses. Do you have someone in your family whom you can recommend as your successor?"

Po-lo said, "You can recognize a good horse by looking at its muscles, bone structure, and general appearance. However, the best horses cannot be identified by appearance alone. Their potential can only be seen when they are developed, and you must train them early to let them fully realize their potential. These exceptional horses have tremendous speed and endurance. They can carry a warrior in full armor and run a thousand miles without rest. Unfortunately, no one in my family has this skill. My sons can distinguish good horses from average ones, but they are incapable of recognizing these "thousand-mile horses."

When the king looked disappointed, Po-lo said, "I do know someone who has the ability, though. His name is Kao and he is a porter who hauls wood and vegetables to the market for a living. He is only a common laborer, but his skill in recognizing a prize horse is as good as mine."

The king sent for Kao and charged him to find the legendary horses. After three months, Kao found such a horse in a remote region. He reported this to the king who said, "What does it look like?"

"It is a yellow mare," said Kao.

When the horse was brought to the palace stables, the king saw it was not a yellow mare but a black stallion. He summoned Po-lo and said angrily, "That fellow you recommended to me is no good. He told me the horse was a yellow

mare, and we have a black stallion here. He can't even tell the difference between a stallion and a mare, let alone the colors of their coats. How can he serve me as a horse breeder?"

Po-lo sighed and said, "His skill has risen beyond my imagination. His ability is now at least ten thousand times better than mine, for while I still judge a horse by nuances in appearance, he can see beyond appearance. When he sees a horse, he does not see male or female, black or yellow. He sees the essence of the horse directly. When one can see that way, external features are unimportant. The important thing about the horse is its potential, not whether it is a mare or stallion, or has a yellow or black coat."

When the horse was trained, the king found that he possessed the best horse in the country.

## *Managing your life and governing a country*

A CERTAIN KING went to ask a sage for advice.

“Can you tell me how I can govern my country well?”

“I only know how to manage my life. I don’t know anything about politics.”

“I am responsible for managing the ancestral shrines and conducting ceremonies of thanksgiving to the earth and sky gods, and I wish to do them well.”

“I have heard that someone who manages his life well can do no wrong in governing a country. However, I have also heard that someone who cannot manage his life can never be a good leader.”

“Good,” said the king, “You have gotten right to the point.”

*Rank, wealth, and ability can get you into trouble*

A SAGE ONCE SAID to Sun Shu-ao, “There are three things in life that are guaranteed to get you into trouble. Do you know what they are?”

“I do not.”

“They are rank, wealth, and ability. If you occupy a high rank in government, other politicians will hate you. If you are wealthy, people will resent you. If you are too smart, your king will be jealous of you. These three things will get you in trouble if they don’t cost you your life.”

“If I am humble about my rank, if I am generous with my wealth, and if I am unassuming about my abilities, would I be able to avoid trouble?”

The sage smiled and said nothing.

Years later, when Sun Shu-ao was on his deathbed, he told his son, “When I was in office, the king offered me one of the richest fiefs in the country, but I did not accept it. After my death, he will offer it to you. You must not accept the rich and central lands. Accept only the poor and remote regions that nobody wants. In this way you and your descendants will live long.”

As Sun Shu-ao had foreseen, the king offered the Sun family the richest piece of land in the country. Taking his father’s advice, the son politely rejected the king’s gift and asked for a poor and remote region instead. The king granted his wish, and while many nobles rose and fell from power, the descendants of Sun Shu-ao lived in peace and kept their fief for many generations.

*You cannot apply one principle to all conditions*

THERE WAS A CONFUCIAN scholar who was journeying from his hometown to the capital. While he was passing through a quiet and untraveled area, a group of bandits robbed him of his money, his horse, and his carriage.

The scholar continued his journey on foot as if nothing had happened. The robbers were surprised that their victim showed no signs of disappointment or grief, so they caught up with him and asked, “Most people are alarmed when they lose their belongings but you are not. Why?”

The scholar said, “A virtuous man is not attached to his possessions. Moreover he won’t satisfy his needs by taking things that are not his own.”

The bandits looked at one another and said, “Sounds like words from a wise man.”

Later, when the robbers had time to think it over, they said among themselves, “Such a wise man will rise in power in the government and he’ll send the police after us. We had better kill him before he gets to the capital.”

So they ran after the scholar and killed him.

When the news of the scholar’s death reached the capital, a family elder told his clan members, “When you run into bandits, don’t act like that stupid scholar.”

Not long afterwards, one of the younger members of this clan went to the remote areas of the country on business and came upon some bandits. Remembering what the family elder had said, the young man argued with the robbers and defended his possessions. When the bandits went off with his belongings, the man still did not give up. He ran after the robbers and begged them to return his goods.

The bandits looked at the young man and said, “We spared your life and you didn’t appreciate it. You are a fool and a nuisance, and your footprints are going to lead the police to us.” So the bandits killed the man on the spot.



*Retribution by accident*

THERE WAS A RICH MAN by the name of Yü who was proud and haughty. He displayed his wealth shamelessly and was scornful of those who were not as prosperous as he. Often he would hold parties on the balcony of his house where after a lavish dinner he and his guests would play a game of backgammon and dice.

One evening, during a game that was more boisterous than usual, a player threw the winning dice of double sixes. There was a great uproar, and everyone started clapping and shouting at once. The sudden noise frightened a bird that was hovering around the balcony. It opened its mouth to squawk and dropped a dead rat it was carrying onto the street below. The rat hit the leader of a group of mercenaries who happened to be walking by.

The soldier turned to his companions and said, "This man Yü is getting on my nerves. He's proud and pretentious and thinks his money can get him anything he wants. We have never offended him, and he throws this dead rat on us. I can't take this kind of treatment anymore. If I don't avenge the insult, I shall be the laughingstock of all fighting men!"

Later that night, the leader of the mercenaries called a meeting of all the professional soldiers in the area and said, "Our code of honor has been violated. We will not be avenged until we have killed Yü's entire family.

The soldiers went to the rich man's house in the early hours of the morning and killed everyone in the household.

*Confusing name and reality*

A MAN FROM the eastern provinces was traveling along a seldom-used road when he fainted. A robber happened to be passing by and noticed the man fallen by the wayside.

Seeing that the traveler was still alive, the robber started to revive the man by offering him food and water. After three mouthfuls, the man opened his eyes. Seeing a gruff and fierce-looking man bent over him, he said, "Who are you?"

The robber said, "I am Ch'iu of the region of Hu-fu."

Startled, the traveler said, "You're not that infamous robber who's wanted everywhere, are you?"

"I am he."

"Then why did you give me food? Did you help me because you associate me with your kind? I am a man of virtue and will not eat anything that comes from a criminal."

The traveler then tried to throw up the food the robber had given him. Eventually he choked on his vomit and died.

Even if Ch'iu was a criminal, his intent and action in this situation was not criminal. Although he might have committed unforgivable crimes, there was nothing criminal about the food and water. Self-righteous people often follow a principle blindly without understanding it and in doing so confuse what is name and what is reality.

*To die for someone who values you is natural*

THERE WAS A RETAINER who felt his master did not appreciate his skills, so he resigned his office and went to live as a hermit by the sea. He swore he would rather live on acorns and chestnuts than receive rations from his lord.

Not too long afterward, the lord was attacked by his rivals. The former retainer immediately left his home and came to defend the lord. Some of the retainer's friends said to him, "You originally left your master because he didn't value you. How come you are so eager to fight for him now? We've heard of people who would die for a lord who appreciates them, but never heard of people who would give their lives for someone who doesn't value them."

The retainer said, "I left him because he shamed me by not recognizing my skills. Now I am going to have my revenge. I shall shame him in front of his fellow princes by dying for him."

To die for someone who values you and to refuse to die for someone who does not appreciate you is natural. To do the opposite out of spite and vengeance is to violate the natural order of things.

*Confused by too many alternatives*

YANG-CHU'S NEIGHBOR lost a sheep. The entire family, together with friends, relatives, and even Yangchu's servants, went off to search for the animal.

When Yangchu saw the commotion, he said to his neighbor, "Why send so many people to look for one sheep?"

"There are too many forks in the road, and we don't know which one the sheep could have taken."

A little later, the search party returned. Yangchu asked his neighbor, "Did you find your sheep?"

"No. There were too many paths, and we didn't have enough people to search all of them."

After hearing this, Yangchu frowned and did not say a word the whole day. His students thought their teacher was behaving strangely, so they asked, "Sheep are not very valuable livestock. Besides, it is not your sheep. Why are you so unhappy?"

When Yangchu did not answer, one of the students, Meng, went to Hsin-tu-tzu, one of Yangchu's friends, to see if he could get a clue as to why his teacher was behaving that way.

Hsin-tu-tzu accompanied Meng to see Yangchu. When he saw Yangchu he said, "There were three brothers who went to learn about virtue. When they returned home after they finished their studies, their father asked them what they had learned. The eldest son said, 'To be virtuous is to value my body and never sacrifice it for reputation.' The second son said, 'To be virtuous is to sacrifice my body for the sake of honor and reputation.' The third son said, 'To be virtuous is to care for my body and preserve my reputation.' The three boys went to learn from the students of Confucius and yet they came home with three different understandings of virtue. Who is correct?"

Yangchu then said, "There was a man who lived by a river and made his living ferrying people across. He was also an excellent swimmer and often rescued people who had tried to swim across the river and failed. As a result, he

received many gifts from grateful people whose lives he had saved. Soon he became a very rich man.

“There were many people who heard about his expertise in swimming and wanted to learn from him. They all hoped that if they learned his secrets of swimming, they too could make a lot of money by rescuing people who fell into the river. However, more than half of the people who came to learn how to swim drowned. All of them learned from the same man, yet some succeeded and some failed.”

Hsin-tu-tzu nodded and went away without saying a word. Meng caught up with him and said, “What is all this? You were both talking in circles. Now I am even more confused than ever.”

Hsin-tu-tzu said to Yangchu’s students, “Our friends couldn’t find the lost sheep because they were confused by too many paths. The apprentice swimmers drowned because they were too eager to try different methods. There is only one principle in learning the Tao. Don’t get swamped by too many choices. By the time you try all the alternatives, you will be totally confused and you will have learned nothing. The only way to learn, then, is to focus on one technique, get to the source of it, and do not abandon it until you’ve completed your learning.

“I am surprised that you have been with your teacher for a long time and yet you do not understand these things.”

*Yang-pu and the dog*

ONE DAY YANG-PU, Yang-chu's brother, went out of the house wearing a white coat. When he got home, a heavy rain was falling, and the courtyard became wet and muddy. Yang-pu quickly went into his room and put on a black coat so he would not dirty the white one.

When he came out, his dog barked and snarled at him. Yang-pu picked up a stick and was about to beat up the dog when his brother Yang-chu stopped him and said, "Don't punish the dog. His behavior was absolutely natural. If he had gone out of the house with a white coat and later had come back wearing a black one, wouldn't you be shocked, too?"

## *Knowledge and action*

THERE WAS A MAN who knew the secrets of immortality. The king of Yen sent a messenger to get this information, but the messenger was tardy, and the man died before the king's request arrived. When the envoy returned to the palace, the king was angry and wanted to have the messenger executed.

One of the king's favored ministers, who happened to be standing nearby, counseled the king, "If the man who claims to know the secrets of immortality cannot keep himself alive, how can he have anything to offer you?"

The king nodded and thought that was a good point. He therefore released the messenger.

There was another man who also wanted to learn the arts of immortality. When he heard that a hermit who possessed this secret had just died, he beat his chest and lamented that he had lost a great opportunity.

When a philosopher heard about these incidents, he said, "These people wanted to learn the secrets of immortality. But in each case, the so-called teachers themselves died. This shows that these teachers are frauds. Why regret not being able to learn from them?"

Lieh-tzu's teacher Hu-tzu disagreed with this. He said, "There are some people who know the principles of a skill and yet cannot apply it. There are some people who can apply the principles without knowing what they are. Once there was a great mathematician who passed on his secrets to his son. The young man memorized the theory but could not apply it. Another person got the information out of the son and applied it successfully. There's nothing unusual about someone who can pass on a theory but not the applications. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that mortals can possess information about immortality."

Knowledge is the precursor to action, but action is not necessarily the precursor to knowledge. It is a rare case that someone both knows the theory and is able to apply it. As to whether it is easier to derive action from knowledge or induce knowledge from action, it is hard to tell.

*Capture and release—an act of compassion or cruelty?*

THERE WAS A CERTAIN NOBLEMAN who encouraged his subjects to present him with doves on New Year's Day and would reward them according to the number of doves they brought in.

When a guest asked why he did this, the nobleman said, "New Year's Day is a good day to do deeds of compassion. I release the doves that are brought to me to show that I value the lives of all sentient beings."

The guest then said, "Your subjects know they are rewarded well for bringing in the birds, so they will scramble to capture as many doves as they can. As a result, for one dove brought to you, many will die. If you are truly compassionate, why don't you issue an order to prohibit the hunting of doves instead? Right now your so-called act of compassion cannot even begin to pay for the cruelty of death and capture."

The nobleman realized his mistake. He said, "You have a point there. I shall do as you have suggested."



*Who was created for whom to eat?*

A CERTAIN NOBLEMAN held a feast of thanks giving. The banquet was attended by more than a thousand people. When some geese and fish were presented to him, he looked up at the sky, sighed, and said, "Heaven is very kind to us. It provides us with grains and creates birds and fish for us to eat."

All the guests murmured and nodded in agreement with the lord. However, one of the sons of a guest, a child of twelve, stood up and said, "I disagree with that. The myriad of things of heaven and earth differ only in shape and form. No one kind is nobler than another, and no one group was created for the benefit of another. Every living thing eats what it can get hold of. We humans eat fish and birds, mosquitoes suck our blood, and tigers eat our flesh. If we were to say that birds and fish were created for us to eat, then we would have to admit that we humans were created for the mosquitoes and tigers to feast upon."

*It's all in your mind*

THERE WAS A MAN who was so poor that he had to beg for a living. At first, the residents of the neighborhood pitied him and gave him handouts. After a while, when they realized the man was planning to live off the charity of others, they stopped helping him.

The beggar became desperate and finally got a menial job in a stable cleaning out horse dung. The neighbors laughed at him and said, "Have you no shame? You've sunk so low that you are willing to clean out horseshit."

The poor man replied, "All labor has its place in society. Begging was shameful, and yet I begged. Now that I have an honest job, why should I be ashamed about it?"

Whether an activity is shameful or not depends on how you think about it.

THERE WAS A MAN who made a habit of picking up things that people had dropped on the street. He would gather torn money notes and tattered receipts from pawnshops and would count the items in his collection from time to time. Then he would go to his neighbors and say, "One day I'll be a very rich man."

Whether you are rich or not depends on how you think about it.

THERE WAS A FAMILY who had a sycamore tree in their courtyard. The neighbors came by and said, "Sycamore trees have fruits that do not flower. It's unlucky to have this tree in your garden. You should cut it down as soon as you can."

The family had the tree cut and dumped the wood behind the house. Immediately, the neighbors came by and hauled off the logs for firewood. The family got suspicious of the motives of the neighbors and said among themselves, "Our neighbors are really crafty. They told us the tree gave us bad luck so that they could get free firewood."

Are people are crafty or not? It's all in your mind.

THERE WAS A MAN who lost an ax and suspected that the boy next door stole it.

For the next few days he watched the boy's movements and decided his behavior and looks were like those of a guilty person.

Later, the man found the ax in a deserted area in the woods. When he got home, his neighbor's boy no longer looked like a thief.

Whether someone is guilty or not depends on your opinion of them in the first place.

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*Those who are involved are muddled; those  
who watch are clear*

THERE WAS A MAN who was so intent on avenging his father's death that he could think of nothing else. He was so engrossed in making plans for his revenge that he forgot he was holding his walking stick upside down. He leaned on his staff and the sharp point punctured his cheek. One of his friends said, "He is so deep in his own thoughts that everything around him is a blur."

There was another man who was obsessed with getting rich. One day he went into the bank and tried to walk off with several bags of gold. The guards caught him immediately. A passerby said, "Only a fool would think of robbing a bank in the presence of armed guards."

The man said, "My mind was so set on the gold that I didn't see the guards."

You often see people stumbling into walls or stepping into holes because they are so occupied by their thoughts that they don't see what's in front of them. When we are too involved in a situation, we can't see straight, and things that are obvious and clear to bystanders are a blur to us. This is very dangerous.

## Books by Eva Wong

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